

Women's Alternatives for Peace¹

Birgitte Siert
Denmark

"You're under arrest!" I have a small cartoon. An enormous amount of small dots illustrates people standing on a square somewhere. In front of them is ONE man with a microphone calling out "You're under arrest." That is really what we are allowing to happen. Men are doing this for purposes of their own: cultural, political, economic, social reasons, brotherhood and fatherlove, hate and fear. It is like a spell. Some women have tried to break the spell, but not hard enough and not enough women. I belong to that part of women's liberation and the women's peace movement who do not believe that women have no responsibility for the world situation and the arms race.

For some years I tried to blame men only for the present state of the world. I cannot do so any longer. I do not question history nor the suppression of women past and contemporary, but too many times we have *let* ourselves be pressed or suppressed back into certain roles. We are pretending that we are dependent on men, our men. For the sake of religion, nationalism, patriotism, for *our* family, *our* children.

All over the world, women are letting the arms race continue to protect *their* children. To protect the men's children, the escalation of the so-called defense systems has taken place. And we, the women, have been kept out or have stayed out of the discussions about the necessity of this, to protect our children. This cannot be done anymore. Furthermore, we are co-responsible for the death of other women's children. Is that sisterhood? We cannot be women for peace without taking actions and that includes for a lot of women to "let go of the moorings, to raise the anchor."

I want to make a confession. I do not, in this time and age and state of the world, believe in the class struggle. I know it is there, going on, but I do not believe in it. It is confusing the issues. We need to formulate a new slogan for utopia. As the world is now, you could formulate "class struggle" as "I am what I have"—"I am what I do." What is wrong with "I am"—you could continue with "I am—in balance." Doris Lessing talks about the balance of the universe and uses the

expression "according to necessity." If we narrow that down to our planet, we all know our responsibilities.

We also know the possibilities are here, but have to be grasped *now*, before the balance is tipped so far no amount of actions can pull our side of the weight up again. The Halifax conference was convened to discuss women's alternatives for negotiating peace. To me that means (in brief) finding out what is worth more to women than nationalism, religion, politics, patriotism, and the right to private property. It also means we have to find ways of negotiating our peace. One way would be to use the United Nations, whose charter is worth working with. I have some more or less concrete proposals for how to do that.

In the United Nations, the "Sixth Committee" has worked with three proposals in the Thirty-Ninth Session (and a lot of the earlier sessions): Agenda Items 123, 124, 125 and 133. Item 123 is concerned with the development and strengthening of good neighbourliness between states. Items 124 and 133 are concerned with the peaceful settlement of disputes between states, particularly with the establishment of a commission for good offices, mediation and conciliation, functions and procedures. Item 125 is a draft code of offences against the peace and security of "man" kind. The Sixth Committee has so far done the following:

ITEM 123: *decided* to proceed with the task of identifying and clarifying the elements of good neighbourliness within the framework of a working group or other appropriate organ of the Sixth Committee as it may decide when organising its work for the Fortieth Session of the UN; *invited* the governments, the UN bodies and programmes and the specialised agencies, to communicate to the Secretary General their views and suggestions on good neighbourliness and ways and means to strengthen it; *requested* the Secretary General to submit to the General Assembly at the Fortieth Session a report on these replies; *decided* to include in its provisional Fortieth Session agenda the item entitled "Development and strengthening of good neighbourliness between states."

ITEM 124/133: *requested* the Secretary General to draft a handbook on the peaceful settlement of disputes between states, based on the outline elaborated by the Special Committee on the Charter of the UN and the Strengthening of the Role of the Organisation, and the views expressed in discussion by the Sixth Committee and the Special Committee; and to make a progress report to the Special Committee at the next Session, with a view to the approval of the handbook at a later stage; *decided* to include on its provisional agenda for the Fortieth Session the item on "Peaceful settlement of disputes between states."

ITEM 125: *requested* the International Law Commission to continue its work to elaborate the draft Code of Offences Against the Peace and Security of Mankind, to develop an introduction as well as a list of offences, taking into account discussions at the last International Law Commission session, as well as the Thirty-Ninth Session General Assembly's views; *requested* the Secretary General to seek the views of member states and intergovernmental organisations, on the conclusions reached by the International Law Commission on its Thirty-Sixth Session work, and to include these views in a report to the General Assembly at the Fortieth Session, with a view to adopting a decision at the appropriate time; *decided* to include a provisional agenda item for its Fortieth Session meetings on a "Draft Code of Offences Against the Peace and Security of Mankind," to be considered in conjunction with the report of the International Law Commission.

What I would like us to do is to take over the responsibility for these items. They contain possibilities for solving conflicts in a nonviolent manner, and an alternative way of negotiating peace. I am sure there are several ways we could go about taking them over. I have thought of some.

(1) We could change the UN charter. Chapter 18, Amendments, articles 108 and 109 tell us the procedures for changing the Charter, if we want to amend it so that women (or a particular group of women) can take over the work of these items. This would mean putting lot of pressure on our governments to take the proposal seriously, to bring the proposal to the UN General Assembly or call a special General Conference, and to vote for the proposal.

(2) Any UN member state can join the Sixth Committee which is working on these items. That means that we could find women politicians in each UN country and have them join the Sixth Committee. And, of course, each country

would need to establish women's support groups for these politicians.

(3) We could also "do the work ourselves." We could begin by getting copies of the papers on the work being done on these Items in the Sixth Committee (foreign ministries and the local UN offices have copies). It would then be up to groups of women all over the world to publicise these papers, to publicise violations of the proposals, and to publicise our own ways of deciding and negotiating on these issues. I have but one illusion: women do not need to use threats of violence to agree/negotiate!

We need a worldwide women's network and we need money, not only for peace work, but because we have differences of need, understanding, and courage. Every country's women have their own problems. The idea of solving them seems impossible to grasp. But to me, the bases of these problems are the same: the division of the duties of work (meaning also the roles of the sexes) and the threat of the use of violence (meaning also the arms race and the wasteful use of resources, and some would add the class struggle). How can we help each other?

Well, women's decade or not, the tendency is to get us "back in place"; the result is the beginning of a women's proletariat. In a UN report called *Studies prepared for the Commission for Social Development* the talk is very much about caring for the family unit, but in 35 pages it mentions little about equality. In the Danish government's official report to the UN on how the ten years of work on equality, development and peace during the Decade of Women have improved the situation of Danish women, only two pages out of a total of 165 discussed our international participation in peace work. The government officials could have written 165 pages about women's work in different peace movements alone, but chose to make that work invisible.

Ladies, girls, women, we have to roam the streets. Let us create our own version of a women's proletariat and support each other. To Western women, I would say, we can start. Let us roam the streets in search of money. If some can spare only a dime a day, that is a lot of money if a million women pay it. Only by showing we mean business can we convince the men, and women in our own countries with different views, and women in other countries who might think that The Bomb is no worse than to die from hunger, and women who have to arm themselves and join the guerrillas.

If we create funds that can be given to women who need them, we are showing other ways of negotiating peace, and

creating a feeling of balance. I, for one, will gladly receive the support—but not the leadership—of men who have a feeling for what has to be done “according to necessity.”

NOTES

1. Adapted from a speech intended to stimulate thinking and discussion, written for the conference on Women's Alternatives for Negotiating Peace, held June 5-9, 1985, Mount Saint Vincent University, Halifax, Nova Scotia.

Elemental Poem

EAST WEST NORTH SOUTH
EARTH AIR FIRE WATER

We turn to the East: AIR
Blue space—breathing—the kiss of life
The wind driving sails and waves across the ocean
Impelling clouds across the sky.
Blowing away the cobwebs at Cape Spear
We take deep breaths and laugh.
Meditation on the breath
I watch your breathing as you sleep.

Otherwise:

Difficulty in breathing, the poisoned air
Tear gas, poison gas in the trenches
Coughing up one's guts
Emphysema, asthma, bronchitis
Choking, throttled, the breath stopped
The air that kills.

We turn to the South: FIRE
The singing kettle on the hearth
Cooking: the bubbling pot of beans
The barbecue that friends and neighbours share
The camp fire, sitting in a circle
Glowing coals, warmth in winter
Making love by firelight
Candles burning before the shrines
Solar energy
The fiery sunset flowing red
The stars dancing round the sky.

Otherwise:

Smoke from the death camps: Auschwitz
The burning of people
Witches burned alive in the burning-times
The mushroom cloud at Hiroshima
Bombed houses catching fire in Philadelphia
Napalm burns on screaming children
Caught in cross-fire
Fire that destroys.

We turn to the West: WATER
First element, the waters of life
The sea womb of the Mother Goddess, giving birth
To strange creatures, bearing exotic cargoes
Aphrodite rises from the foam
The waterfall tumbling over cliff
The holy well, the sacred spring
That heal our spirits
Swimming in the sunset
Immanence is light on water.

Otherwise:

The flood that destroys, the burst dam
The raging sea, sailors drowning
The Ocean Ranger gone, bodies never found
The water cannon on the protest march
Polluted lakes killing fish; mercury poison
The poisoned water that kills.

We turn to the North: EARTH
Gaea, Mother Earth, the Deep-Breasted One
The nurse of seedlings, infusing the blossoms

Forming the fruit
 Digging our gardens
 Manuring, tilling, sowing seeds
 Until the bean hangs on the vine
 Until the lettuces fan out their delicate leaves
 Carrots, potatoes plump and swell
 The fertile earth, abundantly feeding her children
 At the last our final resting-place.

Otherwise:

The parched earth, desert, famine
 The rain forests cut down
 Defoliation—stripping the earth
 Chemical warfare where nothing grows

The earth poisoned with PCBs
 Eroded soil, the waste land
 The bomb—nuclear winter
 The poisoned earth.

EARTH AIR FIRE WATER

Essential elements, natural sources, re-sources:
 Extract, extort, exploit, rape, destroy, kill
 Or reverence, worship, conserve the sacred grounds of being?

Roberta Buchanan

St. John's

[This poem was written and performed as a ritual for a
 Women's Peace Celebration, L.S.P.U. Hall, St. John's, 20
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