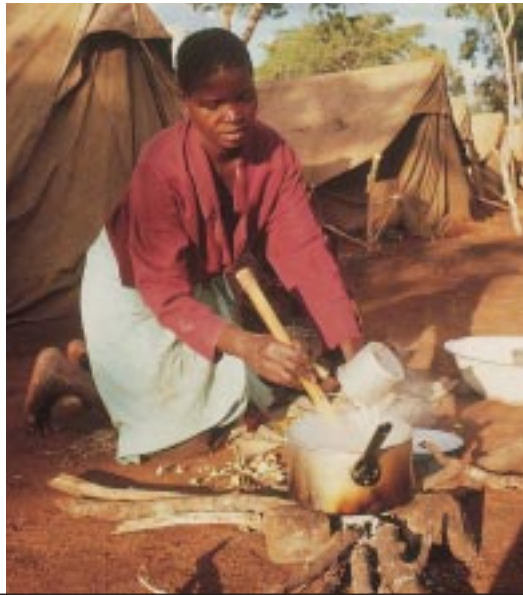


Unpacking the nexus
between theory and practice



BY DR LOUISE VINCENT

CONFLICT PREVENTION

current discourse on the

role of women in conflict prevention

and conflict transformation: a critique

Much of the recent discourse surrounding the role of women in conflict prevention and conflict transformation is shot through with contradictory assumptions used as the basis for the argument that women should play a greater role, that women's voices should be heard more, and so on, in these processes. While the desire for a more humane politics, for the insertion of the legitimacy of emotions and an ethic of care into our deliberations about the causes of conflict and its possible resolution, is to be welcomed, we need to theorise with greater care why we associate these positive social goods with women and what we mean when we talk about 'women'. We need also to look at the implications of doing so and to ask ourselves why these values have been marginalised in the first instance. Calls for conflict prevention strategies to take into account a 'gendered perspec-

tive' (and what is usually meant here is a 'women's perspective' rather than a gender perspective) lack a clear theoretical grounding and have become a somewhat hollow talisman whose real meaning is unclear. Constantly repeating the refrain of the absence of a 'woman's perspective' tells us little about what such a perspective might be and is falsely universalising in its premise. These calls draw from a variety of conflicting theoretical trends ranging from liberal pluralism through to standpoint feminism. What they fail to do is to take into account the post-structuralist critique of such perspectives which denies the unitary subject of both liberal and feminist accounts.

The Liberal Pluralist Impulse

At the heart of the liberal account of politics is the autonomous individual, freely choosing and moti-

vated in those choices by self-interest. Key to this account is the distinction between a private sphere of personal, subjective interests which is mediated by the competition of the market and a public sphere where the aim is to try to rule according to the supposedly apolitical idea of a common good. In the liberal pluralist version of this account different groups ought to have differential influence in public life according to the degree to which they are impacted upon by a particular issue: "Within the liberal logic of self-interest, people are more likely to exercise their agency as citizens over matters that affect them most directly."¹ Embedded in the rhetorical claims made in many of the calls for a greater involvement of women in conflict resolution, for a 'gendered perspective', is the idea that women have a particular interest in peace. In a variety of forums where the need to mainstream a

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gender perspective in conflict resolution is reiterated again and again, the fact that women and children are the most vulnerable group when conflict erupts and are frequently the main victims of armed conflict is cited as the preface to a call for the greater involvement of women in conflict resolution structures.² Women are said to be the mothers, wives, grandmothers, lovers of the soldiers who are sent to die in conflict;

women are said to suffer the most from war and therefore to have the greatest interest in ending it. This then is the liberal pluralist idea of the right to a greater representation in the processes governing conflict resolution deriving from a particular interest in the resolution of conflict.

A further version of liberalism is the associationalist idea which requires a strengthening of the voluntary associations that make up civil society as a counterpoint to state power. "The civil society argument departs from conventional liberal democracy by according voluntary bodies a primary role in organising social life, rather than an ancillary function to government. These smaller private entities, which may or may not be governed by democratic principles, are viewed as more flexible and responsive to community needs."³

In current discourse on the role of women in conflict resolution both liberal pluralist and associationalist perspectives are common. Much of this discourse arises from the non-state sector: from aid organisations, conflict resolution bodies, United Nations subsidiaries, and other civil society formations. Much of the discourse implies that, left to states alone, conflict resolution and transformation is unlikely to succeed, that what is needed is to base these efforts in the lives of 'real people' from which the state is seen to be relatively removed. In particular, the state and formal political processes, it is implied, are the domain of men and the already empowered. What is needed are other voices, in particular, the voices of women.

The Critique of Liberal Pluralism

Yet inherent in the call for a 'gendered approach' to conflict resolution and for the 'perspective of women' to be included in conflict transformation, is also fundamentally a critique of liberal individualism. Opponents have argued that far from the ideal of the neutral state which referees between conflicting interests as expressed by freely choosing autonomous subjects, the state has become the instrument of the already empowered, that the separation between public and private which lies at liberalism's heart is illegitimate and that not all interests in society are in an equal position to assert themselves.

Each of these critiques is suggested but seldom explicitly stated in elements of the current discourse on the role of women in conflict resolution. If the call is to look to formations of civil society for an energy, a richness, a new perspective to be brought to bear on conflict resolution processes, then implicit in this is the idea that while women are often absent from formal state structures they are often to be found in organisations of civil society. More than this, it is implied that the state, male arena that it is, is often incapable of taking into account women's perspectives and interests.

But in another form, the discourse on the role of women in conflict resolution offers a more fundamental critique of liberal pluralism than this. As seen above, one form of critique is simply to say that it is all very well to propose many different groups in society with different perspectives and the ideal is that each perspective is fully expressed. This



leaves out notions of power, race and gender. Implied in this critique is the rationale that if one could cancel out these inequalities of expression, the notion may well be valid. But is this really what the proponents of a greater role for women's voices in conflict resolution wish to say? In some versions it appears that what is being said is something more fundamental. Rather than simply postulating that women's voices should be included because they are an interest in society that is important and has unjustifiably been excluded with unfortunate consequences, there appears to be implied in many versions of this discourse something more far-reaching. Rather than one valid perspective among many, there is the idea underlying much of what is said that women's perspective is *the* perspective that is needed. Women, it is often implied, are peaceable, caring, loving, and kind and we need a world in which these values are paramount. Conflict resolution requires a reinsertion of these values onto the top of our political agendas and we do so by including women.

While pluralism, as Mouffe has pointed out, means the "absence of a single substantive idea of the good life", many arguments for the inclusion of women's voices in conflict resolution seem to hold implicit in them a very particular substantive idea of the good life.⁴ Women's perspectives are not just held as one among many valid ideas but rather are implicit-

itly viewed as offering a better, more peaceful way of ordering social life, a better way of seeing conflict, its roots and causes and thus a better way of solving it, along with a better way of living after conflict. This brings us to the next set of implicit assumptions in this discourse, namely its essentialising assumptions regarding who and what women are.

Standpoint Feminism

Current discourse on the role of women in conflict resolution and conflict transformation owes many of its fundamental assumptions to what has been termed "standpoint feminism". This perspective includes the following assumptions:⁵

- ▲ the claim that philosophical as well as social-scientific theories of the past have been cognitively inadequate because they have failed to take into account the standpoint, activities and experiences of women;
- ▲ to correct gender blindness it is necessary to identify a set of experiences, activities, as well as patterns of thinking, feeling and acting which can be characterised as 'female';
- ▲ such experiences, activities, etc. are a consequence of women's social position or of their position within the sexual division of labour; whereas men have been active in the public sphere of production, politics, war and science,

women's activities have been confined to the domestic/reproductive and private spheres;

- ▲ the task of feminist theory is to make this sphere of activity and its consequences for human life visible, audible and present at the level of theory; feminist theory articulates the implicit, tacit, everyday and non-theorised experiences and activities of women and allows these to come to the level of consciousness;
- ▲ by aiding the articulation of female experience, feminist theory not only engages in a critique of science and theory but also contributes to the process of transforming women's consciousness by giving female activities and experiences public presence and legitimacy.

These points correlate very well with what is being said in the political discourse on women in conflict resolution:

- ▲ it is claimed that conflict resolution practice and theory have failed to take into account the standpoint, activities and experiences of women;
- ▲ it is argued that the dominant discourse of conflict resolution and prevention has been guilty of gender blindness thus excluding women's experiences, activities, and patterns of thinking, feeling and acting;
- ▲ women are seen to hold these different perspectives because of their different social position; women have a perspective drawn from their lives as mothers, carers, wives and they have been relatively absent from the realm of production, politics, war and science;
- ▲ the task of a gendered perspective in conflict

resolution practice and theory is to make the lived experiences, activities and perspectives of women part of the agenda of conflict resolution.

"...women have a perspective drawn from their lives as mothers, carers, wives, and they have been relatively absent from the realm of production, politics, war and science."

The Post-Structuralist Critique

Post-structuralist theorists such as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe have argued that each person belongs to numerous overlapping groups and holds multiple intersecting identities.⁶ In contrast to the fundamentals of standpoint feminism this is a non-essentialist

view of politics. In contrast to the unitary agent both of liberalism and of standpoint feminism, the social agent is conceived of as constituted by a multiplicity of subject positions whose articulation is always precarious and temporary. In this view, then, identities (including both gender and sex) are socially constructed with no basis of 'givenness' in nature, anatomy or some other anthropological site.

Post-structuralist ideas of the radically decentred, multiple-layered subject have thus led to a very fundamental critique of the assumptions of standpoint feminism. Yet the discourse on the role of women in conflict resolution appears entirely to be situated in the paradigms of liberalism, pluralism and standpoint feminism and to have taken little cognisance of this critique. Yet whether or not women can be said to be the bearers of a different and distinctive set of values is the central debate in contemporary feminist theory. As Benhabib points out, "there is not a single organisation with the agenda of which a majority of women would agree...Relishing in diversity, basking in fragmentation, enjoying the play of differences, and celebrating opacity, fracturing, and heteronomy is a dominant mood of contemporary feminist theory and practice."⁷

Poor and working class women, lesbians, black women, and rural women have argued that the standpoint feminist starting point fails to illuminate their lives or address their problems. This is a vital critique for the discourse on conflict resolution to take into account, addressing itself as it does chiefly to poor women in poor countries. The assumption of a universal female dependence and confinement to the domestic sphere is seen as a false extrapolation from the experience of white, middle-class, heterosexual women situated primarily in the North.⁸ This "contemporary mood" of feminist theory and practice poses an enormous challenge to those who would wish to see various forms of political activity based on the idea that women have something in common, in this instance, a common perspective on peace and society which has hitherto been absent from the conflict resolution discourse and needs to be inserted.

Meeting the Post-structuralist Challenge

While it seems empirically difficult to argue with the critique of standpoint feminism as privileging a narrow section of women's interests and experiences

and generalising these to incorporate all women when we use terms like 'women's perspective', this is a politically enfeebling position to arrive at, entailing as it does the loss of the female subject. In response to the post-structuralist challenge, various attempts have been made to shore up the idea of a common women's perspective. One attempted answer has been from the literature which casts women as mothers. Much of this literature comes from the peace movement where it is/was supposed that women were somehow more predisposed to peace as a result of their ability to, or actual experience of, giving life. Yet it has been a characteristic of this literature that it ends up talking not about 'women' at all but about certain kinds of roles or practices. Thus it is not women who are more peaceable or kindly or nurturing, but mothers. And it is not only women who can be mothers but the role of mothering itself which renders certain attitudes available to one – and in principle such roles could be performed either by men or women.⁹ It is the values and experiences that are affirmed, then, not a particular type of person.

Another (related) attempted answer has come from the literature on care. Carol Gilligan argues that an "ethic of care and responsibility" characterises women's moral voices. She claims that women are more likely to display empathy than men: the values of care, responsiveness to the needs of others, the ability for empathy and for taking the standpoint of the concrete other.¹⁰ Again this literature ends up eschewing essentialist notions which make women uniquely caring to talk about the ethic of care itself as a good ethic rather than about which people have this ethic and what the gender of such people might be.¹¹

While the idea of women all collectively possessing and articulating certain fundamental interests and perspectives is impossible to sustain in the face of the post-structuralist challenge posed to standpoint feminism, it may be possible to reactivate the notion of a common good, a shared human vision (as opposed to a woman's vision). It may be that we are able, for example, to claim that whatever our cultural, sexual, class, race, regional, gender or other (intersecting) identity components, it is self-evident that human relationships characterised by mutuality, caring, empathy and compassion are more desirable than relationships based on competition, mistrust, antagonism, violence and aggression.

This is the move that Benhabib makes when she

talks of a vision of feminism "which accepts that the furthering of one's capacity for autonomous agency is only possible within the confines of a solidaristic community that sustains one's identity through mutual recognition...Distinct from the language of eternal contestation, conflict and haggling over scarce resources, the primary virtue in politics is the creation of an enlarged mentality."¹² So rather than the goal of a good politics being the creation of a neutral state which presides over perpetual conflict, the aim is unashamedly to give a particular content and meaning to the good life that is being proposed, unashamedly to avow a politics of mutual compassion rather than narrow self-interest. It is true that the virtues in question have at some points been associated with the 'feminine', while competition, aggression and violence have historically been associated with the 'masculine', but the idea here is to recognise that these are human virtues and human ills; they do not adhere timelessly, biologically or necessarily to any particular gender or to any particular type of man or woman. Rather, these are virtues which are always precarious, vulnerable to corruption and in need of our ongoing and dutiful attention so that they may be privileged in public life. The point here is that it is more helpful straightforwardly to attest to the sorts of ways we want people to be rather than essentialising a notion of 'women' who are then postulated as the guardians of these virtues which have hitherto been absent from public life. Unless we believe that men are as capable of these virtues as women (and contrariwise that women are as capable as men of the vices of greed, aggression and violence), then both our hopes for more peaceable human relations and the probability of our hopes succeeding must likely be dashed.

This response to the post-modernist critique moves in the opposite direction from the latter critics, taking as it does an avowedly non-relativist stance and returning to the unpopular notion of a common good as being the goal of public life. Rather than accepting a notion of human society as consisting in ever more particularised individual interests, it entails, as Hannah Arendt has suggested, a recognition of at least the potential for agreement with others, whatever our gender, class, race, regional


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or other identity; it suggests that the capacity for imagination with which human beings are uniquely endowed provides us with the potential for “an enlarged way of thinking which...knows how to transcend its individual limitations”.¹³ This is an idea taken up by amongst others the philosopher Thomas Nagel who argues that the appropriate form that moral reasoning must necessarily take is for the individual to view a particular matter partly from her own standpoint but partly also by imaginatively placing herself in the shoes of the other persons affected by a particular course of action.¹⁴

Conclusion

Simply to ‘include’ women or women’s voices (and these, it must be remembered, will not be representative in any way of a general category of ‘women’ since no such thing exists) in a politics that is flawed and based on unsatisfactory ethical and moral bases will have little transformative effect. As Dhaliwal has pointed out, such inclusionary attempts do little more than reaffirm a “hegemonic core to which the margins are added without any significant destabilisation of that core”. The add women and stir project serves to “valorise the very centre that is problematic to begin with”.¹⁵ Formal legal rights to equality of men and women are likely to have little impact in the absence of new and deep-rooted forms of political culture. It is moreover impossible to create the latter in the absence of a positive vision which affirms certain values and disavows others. Yet the positive affirming of particular values and rejection of others, say in public education, is precisely what is unpopular among many of the very proponents of conflict resolution who would wish to see a greater role for women. Current dominant perspectives on ‘multi-culturalism’ lead some to the conclusion that *any* positive moral vision is necessarily flawed and that it is never justifiable to affirm certain values and deny others. Because of this shyness about what is viewed as the relativity of value standpoints, these proponents have to introduce a substantive and positive value affirmation through the back door as it were – by suggesting that if we include women, then we shall include the kinds of values and points of view that have thus far been missing. Why not simply talk about these values for their own sake, as human values which are to be affirmed and positively fostered through education and the formation of a

new political culture?

This is in stark contrast to some recent theorists of radical democracy who, in focusing on the need to include various people in the decision-making of a democracy, end up in what appears to this writer to be an absurd position where truth matters less than participation: “the right to decide takes precedence over making the right decisions, which is why who participates in a decision is as important as what is decided”.¹⁶ This seems patently ridiculous. While there are certainly legitimate issues of justice and equality in relation to the unequal numbers of men and women in structures of political power, including conflict resolution and transformation processes, an exclusive focus on who is present and who is absent risks confusing the presence of certain types of people with the presence of certain types of substantive values and ideas. The inclusion of women is no panacea and can easily become a readily achievable substitute for the much more difficult process of negotiating and inculcating a positive peace agenda which includes gender sensitivity. 

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Endnotes

- 1 D Trend, ed. *Radical Democracy: Identity, Citizenship and the State*, New York: Routledge, 1996, p 11.
- 2 See for example various statements at the UN Security Council Open Meeting on Women, Peace and Security, New York, 25 July 2002.
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 Cited in S Benhabib, *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996, pp 20-21.
- 5 As summarised in *Ibid.*, pp 30-31.
- 6 Trend, 1996, p 15.
- 7 Benhabib, 1996, p 29.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p 31.
- 9 See for example S Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1995.
- 10 Cited in Benhabib, 1996, p 28.
- 11 See for example S Sevenhuijsen, *Citizenship and the Ethics of Care: Feminist Considerations on Justice, Morality and Politics*, London: Routledge, 1998.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p 38.
- 13 Arendt, 1961 cited in Benhabib, 1996, p 38.
- 14 See for example, T Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- 15 Cited in Benhabib, 1996, p 44.
- 16 Cited in Trend, 1996, p 67.