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The Daily Power of Women in Peace Building

By **Patricia Smith Melton** | Friday, July 27, 2007

Governments often look upon women's groups as needing their support and help. But as Patricia Smith Melton discusses here, women's roles are changing in society and they too can help in the peace-building process by working in their communities and changing the mindsets of those around them to build a friendlier, better-informed society.

The two most powerful forces in the world today to build sustainable thriving societies are empowered women and the Internet. Both are destined to reach their full potential in creating the components of lasting peace.

We know the destructive forces in our world: poverty, environmental degradation, unchecked disease, domestic and cultural violence, ethnic and religious-led genocide, sexual trafficking, slavery, territorial conflict, and more.

Male dominance

We also know that male perspectives and modes of operation have dominated governing, policy-making and cultural decisions for centuries.

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What is less known is that women on the ground — when not tightly restricted by cultural mores — are the primary force that rebuilds societies from within. Women do this for themselves, their families, their communities and their cultures.

The effects of women's (usually) quiet work not only stabilizes and enriches their personal world — but radiates outward, helping to bring stability to the larger world.

Small groups

Women, organized in small groups, lead the healing and strengthening of societies.

They are organized in villages and cities around the world to build the components of peace through micro-financing circles and agricultural and craft cooperatives, education for themselves and their families, practice of religious beliefs, care of children and families struck by HIV/AIDS, prevention of domestic violence, gaining of human rights, and tending of other social needs.

Different approach

Support of women's work by policymakers can tip a nation towards stability, prosperity, integrity in governance and resolution of conflicts.

Women's ways of empowering citizens to improve their lives, together and nonviolently, bring stability within cultures and open up potential relationships with other cultures.

As people gain the tools and structures to communicate with the "other," they can begin to work together in areas of mutual interest.

Support by policymakers includes, for starters, bringing more women into social planning and ministerial positions, providing more opportunities for government representation, allocating greater funding for the social work of women, demanding that women are included in conflict negotiations — and increasing educational opportunities.

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Supporting women

Support also includes helping women connect with the larger world for educational opportunities, research and respectful exchange of cultural knowledge.

By definition, this means helping women, and men, have the means for Internet connectivity: regional wireless capability, computer training, safe "cyber cafes" where women are secure from social harassment.

Employing the Internet

The Internet is the tool, and connective tissue, for women and men looking for education for themselves and their families, dialogue across differences and peaceful collaboration.

When the immediate destructive impact ends, people choose their responses, and men and women who have the tools to build the components of peace are people who have options.

Just as people intent on doing harm to their perceived enemies organize in loose networks through the Internet so must the vastly larger number of people who wish to live in harmony learn to connect and organize using this powerful and infinitely versatile tool.

The sequence to reach trust between individuals is connection, communication and a consciousness shift. Only then can opinions and information be shared for mutual benefit.

Shift in thought

The consciousness shift is to a new awareness that no longer registers the "other" as essentially different from one's self — but as made of the same

human stuff with the same hopes and fears.

It is the shift from one-dimensional "enemy" to multi-dimensional friend. It occurs when stereotypes break down and misassumptions are corrected because people have communicated enough to experience their similarities.

Forming bonds

An opening occurs for friendship to replace fear and for collaboration where former strangers and/or "enemies" can support each other and break cycles of suspicion and destruction.

To reach a workable trust between entire cultures, this sequence requires a critical mass of individuals in both cultures to come to experience the "other" as people who, like themselves, desire to protect their children, have opportunities to advance, and live productively and creatively.

The sequence for a shift in cultural consciousness leads from a connection between growing numbers of people to communication among those people and on to a consciousness shift of a critical mass that brings a cultural tipping point.

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Helping others

Research demonstrates that people are willing to help others who they perceive as like themselves. However, there is not yet much data on what percentage of a society is required to create a critical mass for changes in policy and action within or between nations.

With the power of the Internet to affect significant change through huge numbers of individuals communicating with each other, such data will probably soon be available.

Balance of power

Even now, modeling theory indicates that a very small percentage of like-minded people can have decisive power to tip how larger groups (cultures and nations) perceive and act.

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At the same time, we need to realize that the concept of an emerging "women power" is, in many societies, up against forces and habits of violence, long-held hatreds and embedded resentment, fear of perceived and real enemies, traditional ways of solving conflicts in line with cultural concepts of what constitutes honor, immediate and generational grief over loss, and the tearing of social order by the acts of a violent few.

We also know that building and supporting an informed, connected civil society can in itself

be shared for mutual benefit.

sometimes be experienced as threatening to those in power.

More pressing issues

In addition, policymakers may feel they do not have the time, resources or peer support to take a "slow" route of building the components of peace, person by person, by empowering women.

It cannot be contested — that in any given moment — a suicide bomber, an incursion by an armed power, or other tragedies outweigh the power of a group of informed citizens, male and/or female, working to reach across differences, educate children, build financial resources, provide shelter, or give health care. Imminent extreme harm, real or threatened, is a dominating force.

Building a peaceful future

However, not to be steadily building the components of peace, working especially with women as the effective force on the ground, is by default to reinforce cycles of violence.

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To strengthen the influence of women and women's organizations is to steadily build the trained people and social structures necessary for healing.

Key role

It increases the number of people who choose their responses by whether those responses bring social benefit or further violence, whether they bring opportunities for betterment or if they restrict possibilities. It builds the middle of society, the moderate sector.

The question is how soon thriving sustainable communities based in women and men working equally at all levels for the components of peace will become a transformative, critical mass. Informed decisions by policymakers speed up this process — and women and women's organizations are key.

Women's ways of empowering citizens to improve their lives, together and nonviolently, bring stability within cultures and open up potential relationships with other cultures.



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