

THROUGH THE EYES OF THE WOMEN: A NEW WAY OF SEEING AND KNOWING OUR REALITY

STATEMENT BY WOMEN FOR PEACE -October 1995

Once again, our country is being torn apart by war. Every day, we are told stories of battles here, attacks there. The politicians, the television, the newspapers tell us this is the way things are and the way things must be. But is this true? Are there no alternatives to war?

The consequences of this war have been uncertainty, misery, destruction. We did not start it, but we suffer, as daughters, sisters, wives and mothers, from the devastating consequences of this war. So, we have to ask ourselves: How do we respond to this violence? Have we through silence and inaction been perpetrators of this war? Is there anything we can do to bring about peace?

But, once again, our country seems so far away from peace. It appears that we are staring at war without end. But whose war is this? We are told the war is being fought on behalf of the nation. The Tamil nation against the Sinhala nation. But, whose nation is this, anyway? What is women's relation to the nation? Are we equal members of it? Or, is it a community dominated by men? In which case, do we want to be part of it? Can we change it? Can we envisage more equal, less oppressive, more peaceful, non-antagonistic forms of community? If men are for war, can't we be women for peace?

Historically, the nation has always been constructed in masculinist terms. Aggressive militancy and revolutionary violence have been employed by male nationalists to establish dominance over its subjects. It is this masculinisation of political power and authority that deprives women their agency and self expression. In this political project, women are seen exclusively as biological and cultural reproducers, regenerators and nurturers of the nation. But we are also real victims of this spurious justification of endless, meaningless war.

For, what meaning does this war have for women in our society? Primarily, it has meant death, destruction and displacement. They have experienced what it is like to mourn without a body to mourn over. Younger women have lost their beloved ones even before they could begin life together. Women all over the country have been deprived of means of livelihood and economic stability. Their lives have become devalued as a result of this war. Shouldn't we challenge this denigration of women's lives?

Why are our Sinhala mothers sending their sons to war, to get killed and maimed? Don't they have rights and freedoms, to choose, to think, to act, to resist, to say quit devaluing our lives. To choose life, over death; self-fulfillment over self-negation; creativity over anni-

hilation; happiness over mourning. Do they question the legitimacy of the state in waging this war against their own sons and daughters?

Mothers of the North, in contrast, do not have a choice about the fate of their sons and daughters forcibly conscripted by the LTTE. Women remain helpless when their sons and daughters are snatched away from their domestic embrace as cadres to strengthen the LTTE's killing machines. In this militarised, socially repressive environment, women experience fear, terror and abuse daily. Dissenting voices are suppressed and anti-LTTE activism crushed. Violently reactionary ideologies are espoused. Women are forced to send their sons and daughters on suicide missions. It is in death that glory and "liberation" can be achieved; heroism is valorised; celebrated as martyrs, deified as extraordinary saviours, they revel and rejoice in this glorified violence. Women are not given the opportunity to mourn their dead. Trapped as they are, it is within this cyanide culture of violence that Tamil women in the North search for a ray of hope. Their lives have become devalued as a result of this war. Shouldn't we challenge this denigration of women's lives?

Tamil women in Colombo live in fear that their husbands and sons will be abducted. The fear that the LTTE has infiltrated into the city and its suburbs has created a strong sense of insecurity and vulnerability amongst particularly Tamil women who fled the north due mainly to the military aggression of the Sri Lankan state and the authoritarianism of the LTTE. Suspected always to be members of the LTTE, they often become victims of ethnic prejudice and discrimination. While in detention under the PTA and Emergency Regulations, they fear physical and sexual abuse at the hands of racially intolerant security persons. Their lives have become devalued as a result of this war. Shouldn't we challenge this denigration of women's lives?

Muslim women in the East, after the LTTE attacks of the recent past, are no longer allowed to go out in public. In the name of protecting the community, Muslim women cannot go to the market, they cannot do their jobs, they cannot visit their friends. They are being made to bear the brunt of the increasing impoverishment of their people. The social and cultural disintegration has only increased their isolation and alienation from community support structures even while they are being made vulnerable to new forms of violence from outside. The recent documented report of rape and subsequent murder of a twenty three year old Muslim woman by a Sinhala policeman in Batticaloa is a case in point. Theirs is a daily struggle for survival under vastly altered conditions. Their lives have become devalued as a result of this war. Shouldn't we challenge this denigration of women's lives?

In other words, in very different, definite and special ways, women too are victims of this war, whether they are Tamil, Sinhala, Muslim or others. We know today that most refugees are women, that most of the internally displaced are women. Upto 1993, around 1.7 million people have been displaced. Women are the bruised and the battered; they are the unseen, unheard, unacknowledged victims of this war. But, we need not remain victims. We can be the agents of change, like the women who formed the Mothers Front in the North and the South. We can be women for peace.

If this is the state of affairs, what, as women, do we do today and where do we go from here? We need a new beginning. We need to advocate multiethnicity and pluralism as the most enabling ideology of the Sri Lankan polity. We must reiterate our political stance, as we have done before, that a resolution to the current impasse cannot be sought in a genocidal war but in working towards the creation of space in which communities belonging to different ethnicities can live with dignity and freedom. The ethnic conflict

began because the Tamil people were discriminated against. Without an end to this discrimination, an end to this war, without a devolved political system whereby the Tamil people can look after their own affairs, we can never have harmony in this country. This is the only, true meaning of peace. We, women can work towards this; we can be women for peace.

But we need new strategies for creating consciousnesses, social spaces for those women in the margins, for voices to be heard and faces to be seen, for us to transcend barriers and shackles that patriarchy, this masculine state, has imposed.

Women! it is time to begin, begin it all over again. Rethink your position, our position. Redefine your selves, ourselves. To say we have done it is not enough. We need to go beyond the limits that others have set for us and see what new, creative, positive possibilities could lie ahead. Together, as women, we can do it. Together, we can be women for peace.

A Strange Thing

Who ever gets to hear of it
is shocked.
Today a girl
Has refused to place her head
On the sacrificial butcher's block,
She wants to live.
Angry, mocking, stones in hand
People have come out to stone her to death.
She has refused to accept
Her husband as a surrogate god.
She has blasphemed.
She wants to live.
For bread and home
She has dared to come out.
She has refused to accept
A life doled out as charity.
Her reins
She has tried to snatch away from the hands
of others.
Considering herself to be human
She has demanded the right to choose.
She wants to live
The centuries old slave collar she wants to take off.

For a single ray of light
She has tried to jump over rituals.
She wants to live.
Who ever gets to hear of it
Is shocked
Beyond words.

Attiya Dawood
Pakistani woman poet

Artemis

I am a woman committed to
a politics of
transliteration,
the methodology
of a mind,
stunned at the suddenly possible
shifts of meaning for which,
like amnesiacs
in a ward on fire, we must
find words
or burn.

Olga Bauman