

**Ordinary Women, Extraordinary Qualities -
Women as Role Models in Peace Efforts**

by

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Abstract

This paper is based on a selected range of literature review on the role played by women in peace efforts. Specific role models of women peace laureates and general references of other women's contributions and efforts in peace efforts are discussed to flesh out the innate common qualities of these remarkable women, qualities that predispose them to be natural peace advocates and envoys. Awareness of such qualities serve as passion enablers for every woman to emulate on the road to peace. In short, to quote Professor Francis Sejersted, of the Nobel Peace Prize Committee:

"In the good fight for peace and reconciliation, we are dependent on persons who set examples, persons who can symbolize what we are seeking and mobilize the best in us."

"If there is peace in a country or in the world, there are no wars or violent conflicts going on" – that is how a dictionary defines peace. This, essentially, is saying that when there is an absence of war or hostilities, then peace prevails. However, rather than seeing peace from the negative perspective of "not war", most cultures of Cameroon, Somali and the Burundi equate peace with the positive perspective of 'freshness', health, well being, harmony, calm and tranquility.¹ Based on this African concept, peace is equated with freshness and harmony which provided farmers with good crops, fishermen with abundant catches and hunters with game.

¹ Role of Women in Peace Building and Conflict Resolution in African Traditional Societies: A Selective Review by Miriam Agatha Chinwe Nwoye.

However, a person's concept of "peace" is often the product of culture and upbringing. People of different cultures sometimes disagree about the meaning of the word, and so do people within any given culture. Peace is not a symbol, peace is a mindset.²

Juxtaposing the positive and negative definitions of peace, I think women advocates of peace would embrace the positive perspective and use our best qualities in helping to build sustainable, harmonious societies where women and men, young and old, handicapped and underprivileged, abused and violated, hungry and sick are treated with dignity, respect and compassion regardless of race, language or religion. Our efforts can be channeled to fostering a network of harmonious relationships and a social space in which differences can be resolved harmoniously.³

The UN views a culture of peace as “a set of values, attitudes, traditions and modes of behaviour and ways of life that rejects violence and prevents conflicts by tackling their root causes to solve problems through dialogue and negotiation among individuals, groups and nations”. It is in this context, that women as sisters, wives, mothers and transmitters of cultural values, especially to children and youth, have played a major role in cultivating a culture of peace.

The first woman recipient of the prestigious peace prize was Baroness Bertha von Suttner who in spite of her privileged background chose to earn a living as an ordinary governess. Her passion for the peace movement inspired her to write the anti-war novel “Die Waffen Nieder” in German or translated as “Lay Down Your Arms” which catapulted her to become a pioneer active leader in the peace movement. Significantly, it was she who convinced Alfred Nobel the effectiveness of peace movement and was in no small way an influence on Mr

² From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peace#Quotes>

³ Dr Di Bretherton, “A Concept Paper for Working Group 1 on Education, Training, Socialization and Research: Learning the tools for living together peacefully and with respect for differences” at the Asian Women for a Culture of Peace, Vietnam, 2000)

Nobel to set up a peace prize. As the female pioneer recipient of the peace prize, she serves as a role model for all women to follow her footsteps and take the route of peace.

If we look back at history, between 1905 to 2004, twelve women⁴ were honoured with the Nobel Peace Prize, each for a different way of working for peace. They worked against war in peace societies and in political life, as humanitarians, as social activists and defenders of human rights. They shared a faith in humanity and displayed remarkable courage.⁵

The next woman recipient of the peace prize was Jane Addams who in the early years helped to provide services for the Chicago immigrant neighborhood, such as kindergarten and daycare facilities for children of working mothers, art gallery, library, and music and art classes. Her determination and stoic commitment to advocating and toiling for peace during World War I and for a true peace afterward, earned her this accolade from Professor Halvdan Koht of the Norwegian Nobel Committee:

*"She held fast to the ideal of peace even during the difficult hours when other considerations and interests obscured it from her compatriots and drove them into the conflict. Even when her views were at odds with public opinion, she never gave in, and in the end she regained the place of honors she had had before in the hearts of her people."*⁶

⁴ The recipients of the peace prize include: Baroness Bertha von Suttner (1905), Jane Addams (1931), Emily Green Balch (1946), Betty Williams and Mairead Corrigan (1976), Mother Teresa (1979), Alva Myrdal (1982), Aung San Suu Kyi (1991), Rigoberta Menchú Tum (1992), Jody Williams (1997), Shirin Edabi (2003) and Wangari Maathai (2004)

⁵ "Heroines of Peace" by Irwin Abrams, Antioch University

⁶ "Heroines of Peace" by Irwin Abrams, Antioch University

Emily Green Balch, the third Nobel Peace recipient in 1946, was an absolute pacifist and her work ranged from her effort to improve international political relations by promoting international cooperation in other fields to her effort to vanquish the evil which Hitlerism represented. The Nobel Committee commended Balch for her gradualism which is the hallmark of patience in peace keeping efforts and regarded by the American peace activists as their intellectual leader.

It took another three decades or so before the peace prize was awarded to two women. On a fateful day in August 1975, three children, who were siblings, were tragically killed in Northern Ireland amidst the Catholic-Protestant conflict. In protest against this senseless killing, Betty Williams and Mairead Corrigan, a housewife and an aunt of the victims respectively, two ladies from different religious background, risked their lives in war torn Ireland. They united Catholics and Protestants by leading nonviolent demonstrations protesting the bloodshed. They founded the Community of Peace People, an organization which attempts to encourage a peaceful resolution of the troubles in Northern Ireland. For their courage and work in promoting peace, they were awarded joint winners of the 1976 Nobel Peace Prize.

The 1979 Nobel Peace prize was awarded to the humanitarian work of Mother Teresa whose compassion for the sick, destitute, lonely, abandoned and most wretched of society earned her the respect and adulation of the world. She started work in Calcutta as an ordinary young nun teaching in a girls' school. However, she responded to the call of a new challenge to work in the slums of Calcutta and subsequently started the Missionaries of Charity which was committed to serve the poorest of the poor unconditionally and with a respect for the individual and the individual's worth and dignity.

In 1982, Alva Myrdal won the peace prize. She led the Swedish delegation to the U.N. Disarmament Committee from 1962 to 1973 out of which she wrote one of the best books on the disarmament race. Myrdal practised what she preached believing that peace could be best served through reason and negotiations instead of belligerence. One of her outstanding qualities was her perseverance in what she believed in as she had never, never allowed herself to give up on her beliefs even in the darkest moments when the UN disarmament discussion looked to be failing.

Aung San Suu Kyi, the peace recipient for the peace prize in 1991, has proved to be fearless in championing human rights in her political opposition to the military dictatorship. In the essays entitled, "Freedom from Fear", she wrote that "it is not power that corrupts but fear. Fear of losing power corrupts those who wield it and fear of the scourge of power corrupts those who are subject to it" and that " truth, justice and compassion... are often the only bulwarks against ruthless power."

It was announced in October 1992 that the prize would go to Rigoberta Menchú, a Mayan Indian of Guatemala "in recognition of her work for social justice and ethnocultural reconciliation based on respect for the rights of indigenous peoples." Her achievement seems more remarkable as it was an uphill road to success as she was born in abject poverty and had little education. She fought against a corrupt and oppressive political system and was forced into exile. Her political activities provided her with the opportunity to develop leadership and diplomacy skills and became a symbol of peace and reconciliation across ethnic, cultural and social dividing lines.⁷

⁷ "Heroines of Peace" by Irwin Abrams, Antioch University

Jody Williams, the founding coordinator of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL), was awarded the peace prize in 1997 for her self-sacrificing work in championing against the use of arms technology such as landmines that caused the lives of the innocent and most defenceless. She achieved the insurmountable and seemingly impossible task of garnering worldwide support to a political level when more than one hundred countries signed an agreement for the total ban on anti-personnel mines. The peace committee credited her for having the passion and courage in starting the campaign and inspiring others to the cause. Her action was of great significance and humanitarian effort as it aimed at sheltering civilian populations from war.⁸

In 2003, Shirin Ebad, an Iranian lawyer was awarded the peace prize for her efforts for democracy and human rights especially those of women and children. In a country of patriarchal cultures that deny equal rights to women she stood up courageously for her beliefs and convictions. At a time of violence, she had staunchly upheld the principle of non-violence through dialogue and law and order. Yet when others were pessimistic about Iran's future, she was an optimist as she stood her ground. Her message to the Muslim women were, " Keep on fighting. Don't believe that you are meant to occupy a lower position in society. Get yourself an education! Do your best and compete in all areas of life."⁹

What started out as the Green Belt Movement in Nairobi in 1977 to combat soil erosion and to produce sustainable wood for fuel use blossomed into a larger picture and new interpretation where sustainable development was linked to peace, democracy and prosperity. This was how Wangari Maathai perceived her movement which won her the peace award in 2004. She has taken a holistic approach to sustainable development that embraces democracy, human rights

⁸ "Heroines of Peace" by Irwin Abrams, Antioch University

⁹ The Nobel Peace Prize, Presentation Speech by Mr Ole Danbolt Mjøs, Chairman of the Norwegian Nobel Committee, Oslo, December 10, 2003.

and women's rights in particular. She thinks globally and acts locally.¹⁰ In politics, Maathai had courageously stood up against the former oppressive regime in Kenya. She has served as inspiration for many in the fight for democratic rights and has especially encouraged women to better their situation.

Besides these recognized women Nobel Peace winners, there are countless unsung heroines whose outstanding qualities in the pursuit of peace serve as beacons of peace in which women look to as role models. For example, in Somalia it was the women who brought the clan leaders together for the first time. And in Liberia, and to a certain extent Sierra Leone, it was the mothers who got together and went to the bush to persuade the young child soldiers to lay down their arms. The Mano River Women's Peace network comprising women from Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone rallied together to call for disarmament and managed to pave the way for the governments of the three countries to come to the peace table.

In India and Pakistan, women have played a part in bridging the seemingly insurmountable differences between the two countries by organizing huge rallies to unite citizens from both countries. Women in Northern Ireland served as mediators to calm tensions between Protestant unionists and Catholic nationalists. In rebel-controlled areas of Sudan, women have worked closely with humanitarian organizations to prevent food from being diverted from those who need it most.¹¹ In Cambodia, women from the provinces demonstrated against the abuses of land rights by applying peaceful but determined strategies. In Belgrade, when women demonstrated against the Milosevic regime, they were not only physically assaulted but were even arrested and demonized and isolated

¹⁰ The Norwegian Nobel Committee, The Nobel Peace Prize, 2004. Press Release, 8 Oct 2004, Oslo

¹¹ "While Men Make War, Women Wage Peace", by Swanee Hunt and Cristina Posa December 2, 2001.

by the government. Still, they were relentless in their protest. These are among the countless examples of the role women play in waging peace in today's world.

What is it in the woman's predisposition that propels ordinary women to pursue noble causes for peace? Angela King, an expert in gender issues, believes that women are better at *listening* and so they tend to be more *receptive to different points of view*. They also seem to be *better at transmitting messages of peace* and *better at traditional means of negotiation* that might work in a community.¹²

Mr Anwarul Chowdury, UN Under-Secretary-General and a key figure in the movement for a culture of peace, stated, "It is women who do the right things that teach people to be *tolerant* and respectful of different views--it is women who can keep the movement for a culture of peace both vibrant and meaningful."¹³

And Gandhi described women as :

"If by strength is meant moral power, then woman is immeasurably man's superior. Has she not *greater intuition*, is she not more *self-sacrificing*, has she not greater powers of *endurance*, has she not greater *courage*? Without her man could not be. If nonviolence is the law of our being, the future is with woman."

On International Women's Day, 2006 Madame Shiranthi Rajapaksa, First Lady of Sri Lanka described the qualities of women as *caring, responsible, compassionate and loving*. As such, women are blessed with an inherent yearning for peace. The concept of responsibility, for helping others is based on a compassionate understanding of human needs. As mothers, they possess an intrinsic empowerment for peace that stems from the multiple roles they play as

¹² "Interview on the Role of Women in Conflict and Peace and Security", *Integrated Regional Information Networks* October 31, 2001 (Angela King is the UN Secretary-General's Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women. In an interview with IRIN, King discussed the role of women in conflict, peace and security)

¹³ On June 13, 2002, an exhibition on women's roles in creating a culture of peace at the Soka International Women's Center in Shinanomachi, Tokyo, Japan.

parents, wives, educators, role models, confidantes, friends, guardians, counselors, coaches, storytellers, companions and soul mates.¹⁴ Hence, the proponents for the road to peace should “learn to think like a woman”.

In African tradition and culture, the woman’s maternal instincts and her responsibility in the upbringing and socialization of her children predisposes her role as an educator and transmitter of values like responsibility, honesty and loyalty through mutuality and deference; and faith and compassion through inner strength and self-control. They also focus on the importance of humanity and consideration for others.¹⁵ In this respect, women are looked upon as a peace builder responsible for the upbringing and socialization of the young.

According to a study by Mathey¹⁶, women are also revered for their contribution to conflict mediation in traditional Africa where elderly woman were respected and played a key role in crisis management and conflict resolution. Under this system, a woman was recognized as having an advisory role, behind the scenes. African women would go to all lengths and use creative stratagem in conflict resolution.

The positive qualities of women as reflected in the various literature review, include altruism, caring, compassion, courage, endurance, intuitiveness, loving-nature, patience, resilience, responsibility, resourcefulness and tolerance. With such qualities these ordinary women when challenged, rise to the occasion to assume the multiple roles of good communicators, educators, envoys,

¹⁴ “Women are blessed with an inherent yearning for peace” by *Manel Abhayaratna*, *Tuesday March 14, 2006 in the Daily Mirror*.

¹⁵ *Role of Women in Peace Building and Conflict Resolution in African Traditional Societies: A Selective Review* by Miriam Agatha Chinwe Nwoye, Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Kenyatta University, Nairobi Kenya

¹⁶ Mathey, M.J., Dejan, T., Deballe, M., Sapiro, R., Koulaninga, A., & Moga, J. (2003). *The Role Played by Women of the Central African Republic in the Prevention and Resolutions of Conflicts*. In UNESCO, *Women and Peace in Africa* (pp. 35-46). Paris: UNESCO Workshop.

humanitarians, negotiators and peace activists. All these roles have been demonstrated in the stories discussed in this paper of ordinary women with extraordinary qualities who serve as excellent role models for all women to emulate in the quest for peace. They have also become change agents as they dare to take on seemingly missions impossible in war, conflicts, violence, bigotry, disarmament and hatred with the conviction that peace will prevail through communication, negotiation, interpersonal skills, commitment, sincerity and love. Dorothy Day spoke for all women when she said, “Love is the measure by which we will be judged”. And time and time again, it is the woman’s love for sons and daughters, husbands, relatives, countrymen and mankind that fuel and propel her passion on the road to peace.

Significantly, in 2000, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1325, which, among other things, called for greater involvement of women in peace processes. Then in 2001, four women and three women's organisations from war-torn and conflict-ridden nations became the first winners of the new Millennium Peace Prize for Women. The prize, the first of its kind, is a global award to honour the vital role that women play in peace-building and the indispensable contributions they have made to resolving and preventing conflicts.¹⁷

In the context of this paper, the road to peace is the responsibility of every woman. Those who have travelled the road, participated along the way and some even gained recognition have already set the wheels in motion as they stand out as role models. They epitomize the four pillars of peace - responsibility, respect, repentance (a personal ceasefire) and commitment - that hold up the Bridge of Peace.¹⁸ Their passion, resilience and determination inspire other women. When they first started out on the journey, they were ordinary women – they

¹⁷ New Peace Prize to Honour Women by Mithre J Sandrasagra (8 March 2001, Inter Press Service)

¹⁸“ The Bridge of Peace” by Karen Judd Smith and Marilyn Morris (1999, WFWP, USA)

could be someone's mother, grandmother, aunt, daughter, neighbour or teacher – but their cause stood the test of time.

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