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GENDER DIFFERENCES AND SUSTAINABLE PEACEBUILDING

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Fort Collins Rotary Club

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associate professor of Ethnic Studies.

In these newsletters Rotarians invite contributions and ideas, suggestions and possibilities for our efforts to educate others about addressing the pressing issues of the day with intelligence, compassion and a commitment to the greater good of humanity and the earth, i.e., nonviolent conflict resolution, improved communication and cooperation, successful negotiation and mediation. We also want to encourage the critical and creative thinking that can help individuals and communities move through obstacles and difficulties in more sustainable ways, i.e., with the interconnected health of all peoples, their economies and their environments.

Sustainable Peacebuilding Fellowship

Wed. May 4 from 1:30-2:30 MT

Caridad Souza, PhD

All are invited. Share this newsletter and the ZOOM link with a friend or colleague.

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/494943309?pwd=SmtTUDYzTlZrcVBhblVLRmdvbVh6dz09>

PERSPECTIVES ON GENDER DYNAMICS IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

Dr. Caridad Souza is the director of the Center for Women's Studies and Gender Research at Colorado State University and associate professor of Ethnic Studies.

Whenever people learn about my work in Ghana, West Africa, I instantly get a patterned western response about gender. "Their men are really sexist, aren't they?" Most Americans know little about gender oppression here, yet they readily comment on gender dynamics in the Global South. Perspectives about Africans comes from the distorted view of western media that condenses fifty-four separate countries into gross stereotypes, especially about gender.

Peace building is important work that ensures we promote a viable future for subsequent generations. Imposing western notions of gender onto African contexts undermines peace building because it doesn't take into account the harmful assumptions about gender.

Nigerian feminist literary scholar, Dr. Oyeronke Oyewumi, provides an important corrective to understanding gender in Africa. She notes how westerners "assume both the category 'woman' and its subordination as universals." Her work on African gender systems clearly shows that women have power and status often only associated with men.

Traversing through Ghana for over a decade has taught me never to assume anything about gender without first asking Ghanaians to interpret. One clear example happened when I was invited by a friend to attend a traditional dance performance. Their host invited them to eat and food was served, yet the eight male and

three women dancers did not move to serve themselves. Everyone waited until the head female dancer, who had stepped away, came back to serve them. I found it offensive that the men waited, assuming it reflected her subordinate gender position. I asked my friend about it and he explained: "she is Dadaga (Senior mother) and has responsibility to ensure that everyone has what they need. Everyone looks to her for the final decision and serving food begins with her direction and blessing." I was stunned to hear that I completely misread the moment. Instead of a subordinated role, she was in a powerful and exalted one. As head female dancer she had customary status and power demonstrated by serving food in accordance with cultural norms and nuances.

Such moments have been plentiful and I have learned to suspend judgement. Instead, I ask lots of questions and adjust my lens as needed. Imposing my view undermines peace building through assumptions, biases, and stereotypes. Westerners in the Global South must change our lenses if we are to build sustainable peace.

ARE WOMEN REALLY THE GENTLER SEX?

Robert N. Meroney, Ph.D. is a Rotarian and an Emeritus Professor of Fluid Mechanics and Wind Engineering with a long career at Colorado State University. He can be reached at Robert.Meroney@ColoState.EDU

I have been reading and thinking about Women and Peacebuilding. Turns out that data, myth, and history do not really support the common trope that women are the "gentler" sex.

For example, many of the ancient religious symbols and gods of war were women! Athena (Greek), Bast, Menhil, and Pakhet (Egyptian goddesses), Bellona, Juno, and Minerva (Roman goddesses), Morrighan (Celtic), Freyja (Norse Valkyrie), etc. Although they were not usually berserkers or associated with bloodlust or brutality like the Greek God Ares, they were often considered more calculating, strategic, and deliberate in their malevolence.¹

A study of female rulers of European countries from 1480 to 1913 including 193 reigns in 18 different polities found women rulers often were "more likely" (27%) to lead their state into conflicts.² Unmarried queens were more likely to be attacked than kings, but married monarchs were more likely to participate as attackers than kings.³

In modern day we have had aggressive national leaders like Indra Gandhi, Golda Meir, Margaret Thatcher, Chandrika Kumaratunga, and Hillary Clinton who have all initiated or supervised violent war activities. Women American political "hawks" have included Sen. Dianne Feinstein, Carly Fiorina, and Sarah Palin. Feminist "hawks" have advocated violence to liberate Muslim women from persecution and burkas.⁴



Roman goddess of wisdom and strategic warfare, Minerva, shown victorious over Ignorance (c. 1591) by Bartholomeus Spranger

¹ On the other hand, whereas the Greek God Ares was seen as destructive and destabilizing, the Roman God of War, Mars, represented military power as a way to secure peace. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_war_deities

² Robert Bebelhoff (2017), Opinion: Women won't save us from violence, *The Washington Post*, May, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/in-theory/wp/2017/05/02/women-wont-save-us-from-violence/>

³ O. Dube and S.P. Harish (2017), QUEENS, Working Paper 23337, National Bureau of Economic Research, Cambridge, MA, 76 pp. <https://www.nber.org/papers/w23337>

⁴ Virginia Heffernan (2009), The Feminist Hawks, *The New York Times Magazine*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/23/magazine/23FOB-medium-t.html>

Overall, the evidence suggests strongly that man and woman just aren't that different in terms of being aggressive or willing to employ violence. For example, we often hear about the crisis of domestic violence against women, but more than 200 studies show that women are just as likely to initiate domestic violence as men. Often men are not willing to admit they are being battered by women, so there are fewer reported incidents. More men than women die in war, but it is true that women and children are more frequently the "victims" in war from starvation, rapes, home loss, and starvation.

Nonetheless, in certain contexts women are more likely to be very good peaceful leaders and enablers. Many scholars and public figures have suggested a world run by women would be more peaceful and equal. Ladies as both stereotype and empirical research show tend to be more collaborative, more empathetic, and much, much less violent on an individual level than men.⁵ Diplomats also suggest that women are good to involve in "post war" negotiations and reconstruction because they are more aware of what is broken.

An excellent analysis of the role of women in war and peace was prepared by Cheryl Benard in 1999.⁶ I have extracted some of her conclusions in the following outline summary.

Much research (by men) until about 1920 was performed to substantiate the general truth that women were inferior and needed to be guided by men. In many cases the arguments were that women are governed by emotion and cannot act logically or dispassionately like men.^{7,8} The authoress responds to this thesis and divides the discussion into three areas:

1. Men, Women and Violence: The proposition is often made that women are fundamentally more peaceful than men, more egalitarian, risk averse, security minded and nurturing. Possibly biological but also societal, educational, and situational based. Hence, the world would be more peaceful if women participated in decision making.
 - a. It may be that women could change the process in democratized societies, but in other places men will still be more violent, and may overwhelm the female tendencies; hence,
 - b. It might be better for all concerned if men continue to protect us from female better selves that could lead to becoming war losers.
 - c. Keeping men as leaders will also give them outlets for their disruptive natures in constructive activities rather than violence. (a male argument)
 - d. Others argue that women are just as violent as men, but have lacked opportunity, or

⁵ Kathy Gilsinan (2016), The Myth of the 'Female' Foreign Policy, The Atlantic, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/08/-foreign-policy-clinton-may-thatcher-women-leadership/497288/>

⁶ Cheryl Benard (1999), Assessing the Truths and Myths of Women in War and Peace, US Institute of Peace Conference on Grassroots Peacebuilding: The Roles of Women in War and Peace, Sept 1999, 19 pp. <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/resource/assessing-the-truths-and-myths-of-women-in-war-and-peace/>

⁷ McRae, et al (2018), Gender Differences in Emotion Regulation: an fMRI Study of Cognitive Reappraisal, Group Process Intergroup Relat. 2008 Apr; 11(2): 143–162. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5937254/>

⁸ David Schmitt (2015), Are Women More Emotional Than Men? Psychology Today, April 2015 <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/sexual-personalities/201504/are-women-more-emotional-men>

- e. A better solution might be to medicate men, so they don't let their violent tendencies overwhelm them.

2. War and Peace, and Women

- a. War and peace affect women differently than men –In war more men die than women, but women also starve, freeze, lose children, husbands, homes, be raped and suffer even if fewer are killed. Rarely are women in control during war,
- b. Peace settlements, post war reconstruction and relief tend to exclude or discriminate against women. – This seems counter intuitive. But actual experience shows most decisions about food distribution, refugee status, and housing are made by men to men's priorities. Male refugees tend to hog most of the relief supplies. Many societies automatically discount the value of women (Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, India) and insist decisions be made by male elders, husbands, or relatives that value females as less worthy.
- c. Relationship between women and peace is not uniformly positive – Athens treated women very badly, yet Sparta educated and valued women. War is often an opportunity for women...E.g., Women's rights and education advanced during war in Afghanistan, lost when US ended war.

3. Perspectives – Men's tendency toward violence makes them see every problem as a nail to be solved by a brutal hammer, whereas women may provide an alternative viewpoint

- a. Prevention – Women tend to contribute most for reform, repair, and reconstruction. Since women are more risk aware they are more anxious to avoid rifts, societal inequities, and mismanagement.
- b. Peace negotiations – Abigail Adams pled for the men to "remember the ladies" during drafting the Constitution. Sadly, even her husband considered her concern with condescension.
- c. Post-conflict period – The "winners" who make decisions after a conflict must make sure that they include women input in restoration activities. Women have even been found to be less given to corruption. Societies with more women in the labor force and parliament have lower levels of corruption.

4. Conclusions - Women, by and large, are predisposed to be more mindful of dangerous consequences, less fascinated by violence, more interested in security, more disturbed by disharmony and more aware of the needs of people around them.

- a. Our last two American centuries may have been better if Abigail Adams, rather than her husband John, had helped write the Constitution and been this country's second president.
- b. Abigail Adams' thoughts on slavery: *"I wish most sincerely there was not a slave in the province. It always appeared a most iniquitous scheme to me – to fight ourselves for what we are daily robbing and plundering from those who have as good a right to freedom as we have."*

MY COMMENT: If you have time, read the entire paper by Cheryl Benard which can be downloaded as a pdf!

REASONS FOR OPTIMISM

Robert N. Meroney, Ph.D

Diversity includes differences of race, gender, religion, culture, social, socioeconomic, political, and sexual orientation.

I think there are reasons for optimism, consider:

- Two centuries ago, women could not vote, own property, have control of their bodies before or during marriage, were constrained from many professions, had clothing restrictions, etc.
- Today, women have the vote, can appeal harassment in marriage, can own property, and are accepted in professions like medicine, law, education, the military, etc.
- Two centuries ago, people of African and Asian descent were frequently enslaved, could not vote, were harassed, could not marry across racial lines, etc.
- Today, races are protected for the vote, for education, many professions are open to participation, marriage across racial lines are not punished by law,
- Two centuries ago, people of Jewish, Catholic, and Muslim faith were openly abused privately and in the law.
- Today, such religious bigotry and behavior, though still present, would be punished if overt or in public. Religious bias in employment, housing, or service are rare.

Equity involves justice, even-handedness, and fairness across the identities mentioned above.

I think there are reasons for optimism, consider:

- One century ago, wages, housing, education, voting, employment, were strongly biased against minorities,
- Today, there have been major changes that acknowledge the “special needs” of the handicapped, those affected by generations of lack of access to resources, etc. It is not perfect, but it is not automatic, and those affected have a voice and an opportunity to complain.

Inclusion specifically addresses policies of equal opportunity and adequate resources for the disadvantaged.

I think, again, there are reasons for optimism, consider:

- One century ago, the self-worth of minorities was openly challenged, and it was “common knowledge” that some groups were not as physically or mentally capable of independent and unsupervised activities.
- Today, there is not only attention being given to “physical” equality in income, resources, opportunities, etc. but there is concern about the mental wellbeing of all groups.

Obviously, society can do better, but I believe we should be optimistic for future improvements, and not despair those things are not happening faster.

UNDERSTAND PRIVILEGE

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In my 2019 book, *learning Life's Lessons*, I reference November of 1848 when the first term of classes for the new Boston Female Medical College began with twelve students from across New England, New York and Ohio. In 1856, the college changed its name to the New England Female Medical College (NEFMC) and ranks as the oldest medical school in the United States exclusively for women. After only 26 years of existence, the New England Female Medical College merged with Boston University School of Medicine in 1874. Women have long played key roles as caregivers and health providers, essential roles when conflicts erupt. The question remains: Could these talents be tapped for conflict prevention and sustainable peacebuilding, where the focus is on the interconnected health of people, their work and environment.

Prior to 1847 when Elizabeth Blackwell was inspired as the first woman to enroll in a United States medical school when she entered the Geneva Medical College, many women had served as family physicians, but they were denied attendance at medical lectures and examinations. Blackwell set a new standard for young women everywhere, helping them gain entrance into the medical world by claiming that women had something unique to offer medicine that men could not. Basic graduation requirements consisted of previous medical study, two years of attendance at NEFMC, a final thesis, and passing a final exam.

The Female Education Society opened in Boston in 1848 and was created exclusively for the medical education of women. Its members sought to establish a medical school in Boston complete with its own teaching hospital that would teach women midwifery and nursing so they could treat women and children. The willingness to challenge male privilege would grow slowly in various pockets of enlightened thinking and eventually prevail. The following “tip” is adapted from #54 in *147 Practical Tips for Teaching Diversity*.

Help students and others discuss the privileges enjoyed by various groups of people. You could start with “white privilege” — “those unspoken, unwritten rules of conduct by which Whites are treated by others,” usually including the “freedom to select any place to live, to shop without being followed, to write checks without showing identification, to secure bank loans with no collateral, and to be offered employment on the basis of one’s family or friends rather than one’s resume” (Paccione, 2003, p. 151). In addition to the impact of racist prejudices, privilege comes in many other forms as well, including gender, social class, sexual orientation, religious prejudices, and disabilities.

Allow people to explore the various implications for privilege, i.e., historical, economic, educational, social, even personal and emotional. You could also explore the implications of “social class privilege” or “majority privilege.” Ask what could inspire change.

In the following essay, Lloyd Thomas analyzes the nature and history of the concept of “race” and what has been problematic with its use to identify, privilege or stigmatize. We ask if similar arguments can be made about gender differences and the ways in unsubstantiated barriers and biases have been erected to privilege men.

MYTHS OF RACE

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For centuries, people have divided, identified and categorized themselves according to “race.” China claimed “Peking man”, the remains of *Homo erectus*, to be a direct ancestor of the unbroken Chinese [racial] lineage which went back over 700,000 years. German Nazis tried to define a non-Jewish Germanic people as the “Aryan race”... despite the fact that the term was originally used in ancient times as an ethno-cultural self-designation by Indo-Iranians in order to contrast themselves as superior to their nearby outsiders and classify them as “non-Aryan.” In India today, Hindu religious nationalists have suggested that the “old Hindu epics” are not allegories, but those events actually happened to ancient “Hindus.”

The myth of “Race” today has been created based on people’s physical attributes or religious beliefs, language spoken, and even their geographical place of birth (e.g. skin color, facial features, hair texture, body shapes, even eye color, Islamic/Christian, born in the U.S.A. or another country, speaks only English etc.). Nevertheless, in the “Science News” section of the January, 2022 issue of *National Geographic* there appeared a note titled, *The Complete Human Genome* (p. 9). It read: “Scientists made waves in 2001 with the first draft sequence of the human genome. But headlines celebrating a complete human genome were premature. Despite years of additional work, some 8 percent was still missing—until May 2021, when 99 researchers unveiled what they called the “first truly complete” sequence of a human genome, spanning 3,055 billion base pairs across 23 chromosomes. The study, which was posted before peer review, adds nearly 200 million base pairs and multiple corrections to prior sequencing efforts. But more work remains: Scientists have yet to sequence the Y chromosome.”

That means there is no single genetic combination that defines the entire human race. Race is a socially constructed [mythological] categorization of people...not a biological or scientific classification.

All of our individual differences are based on specific combinations of those billions of “base pairs” [DNA/RNA patterns], that are *unique to each of us* (like fingerprints etc.) In the past, “scientists” created three different “races”: Caucasoid people who had lighter skin and fine hair; Negroid people with darker skin and course hair; and Mongoloids ...people with brown or yellow skin and distinctive folds on eyelids. This clearly demonstrates that these three races were not based on genetic variations. Rather, race is just a label people created to divide people and place them in distinct categories. Such a labeling dehumanizes people and results in the creation of “racism.”

Angela Onwuachi-Willig, a law professor at the University of Iowa College of Law, writes, “Like race, racial identity can be fluid. How one perceives her racial identity can shift with experience and time, [and upbringing] and not simply for those who are multiracial. These shifts in racial identity can end in categories that our society, which insists on the rigidity of race, has not even yet defined.”

Dr. Onwuachi-Willig goes on to write, “Scientists need to be careful about which overarching narrative they serve. Is it one that emphasizes the essential unity of our species [human race]? Reminding us, for instance, that we are genetically more alike than any other primate species and that individual difference far outweighs any group difference? Or is it one that searches in the margins of our genomes for the tiny statistical differences between populations, consciously or unconsciously playing to those who seek to divide us in other ways?” (“The Story of Human Difference” in *National Geographic*, Vol. 240 No. 3, September 2021 p. 15).

Until we recognize and acknowledge the factual reality that all people everywhere *belong* to the *human race* and each one of us has unique and valuable human characteristics, we will continue to suffer from racism, discrimination, insecurity and violence (even war). As Amitav Acharya writes, “The peacebuilding community (including non-governmental organizations, funders, government agencies, etc.) can do so much more in recognizing how the vestiges of empire and racism condition responses to war and violence. These are apparent in funding decisions among governments and private funders, in the structure and delivery of aid and humanitarian assistance, and in the conflicts that garner public outrage and support. The movement to decolonize aid is an excellent starting point to reform practices in peacebuilding.” (Amitav Acharya (2021). “Race and racism in the founding of the modern world order.” *International Affairs*, 98(1), 23-43. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iab198>).

PRIORITIES OF THE ROTARY FOUNDATION

See the RI website: <https://my.rotary.org/en/learning-reference/about-rotary/our-priorities>. You can find some of our past issues at the Rotary District 5440 website: <https://www.rotary5440.org/sitepage/peace-building-newsletters>.