

No Place to Call “Home”: A feminist ethical inquiry into women’s experience of Alienation

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Abstract

In this paper I argue that the extreme masculinist culture which constitutes today's world is a culture of violence in which conflict is never actually resolved. As such, a situation exists where most women do not and cannot feel at home.

Such an experience of prolonged "homelessness" or "alienation" has serious social and psychological effects on women, and these effects are examined in relation to violence in the home, in society and at a global level. Women's experience of homelessness in a violent male world is compared with the experience of displacement felt by Indigenous peoples in many countries, Minority groups, the Palestinians and, also, people in refugee camps throughout the world.

It is argued that women have a central part to play in the establishment of a new, less violent world order and that feminism must be alert to today’s challenges and be prepared to form new, appropriate global alliances to meet those challenges.

Introduction

The theme of this section of this very important conference is: *Impact of Conflicts on Women and Children*. And what I want to do in my paper today is direct our attention particularly to the effects of global conflict on women and children... so that the focus of my paper is both global and personal. What is happening out there? And how is it affecting us personally?

These are important questions for two reasons:

1. because as women we need to be emotionally and psychologically healthy and we can only be emotionally and psychologically healthy if we live with our eyes open and see and acknowledge what’s going on around us ;

and

2. because as women our awareness enables us to relate to our children and grandchildren in an enlightened and honest way. It is still women who spend the most time with children and, therefore, have the most influence on them in their early years. And if we are content to live in ignorance of social and global issues, then it is ignorance we pass on to our children, but if we are enlightened, there’s more chance our children will also be enlightened and much more ready to face the real world.

So, let’s begin by taking a quick look around the world. What do we see? We see lots of positive things. But we also see war, terrorism, hatred and suffering. We see greed, exploitation, wealth for a few and massive poverty for many. We see violence against women and children by men - on the world stage, in our communities and in our own homes.

And we say to the men in charge (because it is men who are in charge of almost every nation on earth), men for whom power and holding on to power at any cost is all important - we say: Whatever you’re doing, it’s not working! You may feel powerful, but it’s not working for the rest of us!

- * There's terrorism, terrorist cells, terrorist acts proliferating all around the world.
- * There's the United States, still suffering pain and humiliation as a result of the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington on September 11, 2001, but at the same time, we see them aggressively waging their so-called "war on terrorism" first on Afghanistan, then Iraq and who knows where else.
- * Continuing our look around the world, we see the Middle East and the interminable violence between Israel and Palestine. We all know it will never end till both sides give up the philosophy of "an eye for an eye" but we despair because there's no evidence that that will ever happen.
- * Here in your own country of India, you observe your government and the government of Pakistan continuing to spar with each other in the long-standing conflict over Kashmir and other issues. Nobody is suggesting it's a simple matter to resolve the issues. But you would see more clearly than I the damage this history of hostility inflicts on both countries. I was reading recently about Indian Peace activist Rita Manchanda, founder and committee member of the Pakistan India People's Forum for Peace and Democracy, and she outlines some of the damage. She says - the continuing hostility has legitimised an arms race, diverted much-needed development funds to military purposes, undermined democratic institutions and strengthened the rise of ultra-nationalist religious right-wing forces in both countries (<http://www.womenwagingpeace.net/content/articles/0051a.html>). It seems clear, doesn't it, that less bullying behaviour and more humility on the part of both governments, with a genuine desire to resolve the conflict, is surely what is needed.
- * And what about Australia - that relatively insignificant country down in the southern hemisphere? My country. We used to be known around the world as a proud, peace-loving, generous country. But now, since our government chose (against the wishes of the vast majority of Australian people) to sell its soul to the United States and become one of what George W. Bush called the "Coalition of the Willing", my country is now aligned with those who are prepared to wage war in an attempt to achieve global dominance. I can tell you - it fills us with shame.

So, as we all look around the world, those of us who believe in justice and human rights and in resolving conflict in ways that don't involve murder and mayhem, we find ourselves grappling, at a personal, psychological level, with what I'm calling today feelings of homelessness or alienation. We look at the attitudes and actions of our own governments and it's like we have "no place to call home". No place that feels familiar. No place with which we can identify. And I'm reminded of English writer Virginia Woolf's much-quoted words:

As a woman, I have no country
As a woman, I want no country
As a woman, my country is the whole world.

This paper, which I have titled *No Place to Call "Home": a feminist ethical inquiry into women's experience of Alienation*, is just that - a feminist ethical inquiry into women's experience at this time (though men who also abhor violence will readily identify with it). And it's based in a radical feminist philosophy. Surprisingly for such a dark topic, though, my message is overwhelmingly positive.

First, I'm going to ask: **What is psychological homelessness?** Then, as a way of trying to understand the experience of homelessness or alienation many women feel, I want to share with you the results of a small survey I did into the emotional effects on Australian women of Australia's involvement in the War on Iraq. Finally, I'll conclude by discussing in a fairly positive way the question: Is there any hope for a better future, free from feelings of alienation?

1. First, a definition: What is psychological homeless?

The term used in medical and psychological literature for this kind of homelessness is "alienation" and, as one would expect, there are two kinds of alienation:

- estrangement from society; feelings of being an outsider, foreigner or outcast; and
- estrangement from oneself, feelings of unreality or depersonalisation (Miller and Brackman Keane, 1987).

In this paper, as you will realise, I'm choosing to focus on the first. When I say: "**No place to call Home**", I'm referring to a sense of estrangement from one's own society, one's own country, feelings of being an outsider, a foreigner or an outcast.

2. Second question: What has caused this sense of alienation in so many women around the world? And what are the emotional and psychological effects of such alienation?

I want to suggest that the sense of alienation so many of us women are experiencing at this time is due to the extreme masculinist culture, the culture of conflict, the culture of bullying, the culture of violence all around us. Male violence, against each other and against women, escalating on every front. Let's not forget that the world is as it is because men have chosen it - not women. It is men who make the decisions. Women in every nation on earth are deliberately excluded from decision-making on national and international issues.

When I did my survey earlier in the year, I asked two simple questions and sent it out on an email discussion list. They were:

1. How did you feel in the months leading up to the war on Iraq? [Remember, these were Australian women and the questions were related to Australia's involvement in the war on Iraq earlier this year];

and

2. How have you felt since the war began?

As the responses to my survey came in, it was very revealing to read what women had written and the more I read, the more the word "alienation" impressed itself on my mind. And it was clear that their sense of alienation had two main causes:

- . They found violence and war hard to identify with; and
- . They felt entirely left out of discussions and decision-making.

And it's true, as I've already intimated. Whenever the leaders of nations (who are usually men) are considering war, women are deliberately pushed aside, ignored, alienated. No male

leader, considering involving his country in war, ever stops to seek women's opinion. Australian women were totally left out of decision-making about the war on Iraq and the previous war on Afghanistan. It's like war is "men's business" and women are not permitted to give an opinion. We are silenced and, because of that, many women in my survey experienced a huge sense of alienation.

The words which appeared in almost every woman's response were - powerlessness, helplessness, hopelessness. Many said they felt "depressed". Some mentioned "grieving". Another said: "I found myself crying for no reason at all". Others spoke of despair, disillusionment, disequilibrium, shame.

Some spoke of "fear" and "anxiety" following the terrorist attacks of 11 September but implied that it wasn't fear of terrorists as much as fear of what the US would do in retaliation. President Bush's threats of revenge, threats of a war on terrorism, caused extreme anxiety because everybody knows that the US has the munitions capability to destroy the entire earth. All of these feelings - powerlessness, helplessness, hopelessness, depression, sadness, fear, anxiety - are feelings which suggest a deep sense of alienation -- from one's own society. And while the immediate feelings may subside over time, the sense of alienation remains.

One word used by all respondents which did not suggest alienation was "anger". One woman said that once the war started, she was "angry, cynical, outraged, full of contempt for our so-called leaders...". Another said: "Since (the war started) I have been seething with anger and have been nauseated by their heartlessness toward the Iraqi people and the insulting media propaganda they have been feeding us day and night".

One type of comment made by most respondents centres around the issue of the exclusion of women. Several mentioned the words "male madness", in acknowledgement of the fact that women were excluded and that they considered the decision to go to war to be insane. "It's a madness", said one woman. "Male madness caught up in its own web of power and intrigue without a thought for anyone else in the world". Another spoke of male power in this way: "male power abrogates everything to itself, plunders it and profits from it".

Then there was this comment about women being excluded from decision-making: "I have... been reminded just how fragile my position is... being a woman in a society where we had hoped women had come a long way towards making joint decisions for a better world...". And another said: "As a woman, I don't feel at home anymore. [This is where I got the title for this paper]. All the images of war are foreign to me - the propaganda, the lies, the threats, the violence, the ease with which people are murdered, the sanitised language, the obvious delight in the humiliation of the enemy. Where do I belong?", she asked.

So, for many women, the sense of alienation came from those two sources: On the one hand, there was the foreignness of violence and war as ways of dealing with conflict; and, on the other hand, there was the experience of being alienated by a male-dominated system which makes little or no room for women's voices.

Let me add that the psychological effects of alienation can be very serious because, for a healthy personality to develop and be sustained, there needs to be a healthy balance between a sense of individuality and a sense of belonging with others (Erikson, 1980, p.94-97). When that sense of belonging is lost, what usually results is one or more of the following: confusion,

anxiety, depression, despair, apathy, dissociation, a loss of faith in oneself and a loss of hope....that is, a loss of positive connection with the future.

Another effect of alienation is a feeling of insignificance and this was described in various ways by respondents to my survey. It reminded me of what Erich Fromm, Social Psychologist writing half a Century ago, said about the effects of the experience of not belonging. Speaking of a particular man and his relationship to the rest of the world, Fromm said: "Unless he belonged somewhere... he would feel like a particle of dust and be overcome by his individual insignificance" (Fromm, p.17).

One respondent referred to the warmongering of some of the world leaders as a "huge, unstoppable wave..." and then, in another sentence, said: "...I feel so very, very small". The words "small" and "irrelevant" were used by several women. Another expressed her feelings of insignificance like this: "I feel diminished. I've always believed I could make a difference but now I know I can't. Nothing I said or did mattered to those intent on war and I'm left wondering where I fit in and what I have to offer". All these expressions of insignificance are the result of feelings of alienation, of isolation, of not belonging. And while my survey was done with Australian women, I know that these are feelings women all around the world readily identify with.

3. So, we come to my third and final question: *Is there any hope for a better future?* Is there any way to release ourselves from these effects of alienation? Well, yes! And strangely, our release comes from the very fact that we are consistently excluded from social and national decision-making. Because we women are ignored and excluded from the structures of power in our own societies, we can choose to stand apart from the violence. Separate ourselves out, as it were. We don't have to "own" it. We are freed up, as Virginia Woolf says, to be citizens of the world.

A radical feminist assessment of our alienation, then, suggests a course of action involving three steps -

1. First, *Acknowledge and accept* the painful truth that the male power-brokers of your country and mine still exclude and alienate women -- and that they have no intention of changing that in the foreseeable future.

2. Second, having acknowledged that we are excluded and alienated, we must *choose exclusion and alienation*. In other words, let's stop pretending. Let's stop demeaning ourselves. Stop trying to think of an argument that might convince the men in power that they ought to include us. And, let's stop making excuses for our leaders. Stop believing that, if we chip away at them for long enough, we'll wear them down. It's demeaning to us. We don't want crumbs from the men's table. We want to sit down at the table with men and share the meal equally. And, for as long as we are refused that human right, we will choose to exclude ourselves.

3. Then, having chosen exclusion and alienation, we are freed up to be citizens of the world. And this is the third step. *Claim citizenship of the world* knowing that such citizenship affords us important opportunities. For example:

- Citizenship of the world enables us to transcend the obligatory daily effort of trying to convince men in our own countries, in our own universities, in our own communities, to include us when we know that they have no intention of including us in any significant way;

- Also, citizenship of the world inspires us to set about creating a global community of women intent on changing the world -- developing networks aimed at working together to create a global agenda focused on justice and non-violence. Such networking is made so much easier, of course, by our use of the Internet.

In addition to *opportunities*, claiming citizenship of the world also involves certain *responsibilities*:

1. First, we must open our minds and understand in fresh ways the effect male violence and greed are having on our world at the beginning of this 21st Century.

2. We must work to keep our global networks fresh and informed and alive.

3. We must constantly reexamine our role, as women and as feminists, in resisting the forces hellbent on destroying life as we know it for their own gain. We need to ask: What do women have to offer in this new and extraordinarily violent world? What does a feminist analysis have to offer? What new things must we do in order to change the world?

4. We need to expand our horizons to include the possibility of working with other radical social and human rights' activists - including men. But in working with men, let's be careful that our values and our aims are not pushed aside in favour of theirs. Given the experience of exclusion women have felt over the years whenever we've attempted to work with men who we thought were on the same wavelength as ourselves, the option of working with men has to be approached with extreme caution and always on our own terms. But it is an option worth exploring again, I think.

5. And finally, the opportunity afforded to us of creating a global community of women is also a responsibility. It won't just happen. We must work to make it happen. Already we have many examples of women working together across national and sectarian borders to promote peace and non-violence and healing. And I want to bring this paper to a close by mentioning a few of those examples –

. Rita Manchanda, who I mentioned earlier, tells of a conference she helped organise in July 2001 centred on the theme “Strengthening Women Building Peace”. Over 30 women peace builders from South Asia gathered in Kathmandu to map a plan for peace. Rita Manchanda called it “Mapping from the Margins”. Women in this region working together for peace.

. In July 2002, four women from Townsville in Australia, deeply concerned about the state of the world, put their heads together and came up with the idea of organising an International Conference around the theme: *Poverty, Violence and Women's Rights... Setting a Global Agenda*. I was one of those four women and I'm proud to say that we were successful in bringing together 420 women from 22 countries across the globe to focus on the need to work together to create a new world agenda for the 21st Century.

. Another example of women working together to promote peace is the Women in Black movement - an International organisation with chapters in many countries. These women demonstrate by dressing in black and holding vigils and other rallies for peace.

. Then, there is RAWA - the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan - who

set up their headquarters over the border in Pakistan and worked tirelessly to free women and girls from the oppressive practices of the Taliban. To this day, they continue to work for the education and liberation of women and girls.

. Another example of women working together to heal the wounds caused by male conflict and division is that undertaken by the women of Ireland - both Protestant and Catholic. They have developed a program of healing (based on South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation process) aimed at reconciling protestants and catholics and bringing healing to their Nation (Monica McWilliams, paper delivered at the *Activating Human Rights and Diversity Conference*, Byron Bay, Australia).

. And finally, I want to quote from a joint declaration released by Palestinian woman, Dr. Sumaya Farhat-Naser and Israeli woman Gila Svirsky entitled: "We refuse to be enemies". In the opening sentence of this inspiring declaration, they say: "...we would like to world to know that women in Israel and Palestine are ready to make peace". They continue:

For the past 13 years, women have been the most vibrant, daring and progressive part of the peace movement on both sides of our divide. Palestinian and Israeli women have been meeting and negotiating with each other for years, even when the very act of speaking to each other was illegal in Israel and prohibited in Palestine.

.... Were it left to us, we would long ago have had a peace agreement that settles the difficult issues between us.

We women advocate an end to the situation of occupier and occupied...

And a crucial point of agreement: We condemn all forms of brutality, violence and terrorism - whether by individuals, political groups, governments, or the military. We have had enough of the killing on both sides....

And, apart from our public, organizational activity, we women also operate as secret agents. We are not just the mothers, teachers, nurses, and social workers of our societies. We are also secret agents serving up politics with dinner, teaching the lessons of non-violence to every child in our classrooms, every patient in our care, every client we advise, every son and daughter that we love. We plant subversive ideas of peace in the minds of the young before the agents of war have even noticed....

And they conclude their declaration by saying:

The women’s peace movement in Palestine and in Israel believes that the time has come to end the bloodshed. The time has come to lay down our weapons and our fears. We refuse to accept more warfare in our lives, our communities, our nations. We refuse to go along with the fear. We refuse to give in to the violence. We refuse to be enemies (Farhat-Naser, 2003).

Following the examples of such determined and courageous women, let me reiterate that,

while the masculinist world of violence and conflict and war leaves us with “no place to call home”, as citizens of the world we have the privilege and the responsibility of working together to envision and develop a new world agenda, based on radical feminist and radical social justice principles.

This is our task, and it’s a task which is worthy of our total commitment.

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