Engendering the Concept of Peace: on Violence against Women

Ito Ruri

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By Ito Ruri
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This article draws on the Tokyo Tribunal on the Military Comfort Women to reexamine issues of violence against women in both wartime and peacetime. In highlighting the centrality of the issue of violence against women, Ito offers a feminist alternative to dominant peace discourse. The Tokyo Tribunal of December 2000, organized by Asian feminists, presented the testimony of scores of surviving military comfort women from a dozen Asian nations, as well as specialists on Japanese atrocities in the Pacific War. The citizens' tribunal convicted Emperor Hirohito and the Japanese state of crimes against humanity in their treatment of more than 100,000 Asian comfort women who served as the sexual slaves of the Japanese military. Ito draws on the experience of the comfort women and World War II to advance a gendered concept of positive peace. This article appeared in Heiwa Kenkyû (Peace Research) Vol. 26 November 2001. Ito Ruri is a Professor at the Institute of Gender Studies, Ochanomizu University.

...when one husband beats his wife, there is a clear case of personal violence, but when one million husbands keep one million wives in ignorance, there is structural violence.

-- Johan Galtung, "Violence, Peace and Peace Studies," 1969

1. Engendering the Notion of "Positive peace"

Whether viewed as a value or an analytical concept, there has been a tendency to understand "peace," as well as its opposite, "war," as belonging to relations between nation-states. Under international law, for example, only nation-states are recognized as having the right to engage in war. Similarly, "peace" is regarded as something that can only be realized through the agency of the state. This perception is based on a notion of the sovereign state system which has prevailed since the Westphalia Treaty of 1648 and which is still deeply rooted in the minds of people today. At the same time, attempts to de-naturalize this concept of peace have been at the core of progressive work in Peace Studies since the 1960s. One well-known example of this can be found in the work of Johan Galtung, who laid the theoretical groundwork for a distinction between direct, "personal violence" and indirect "structural violence" in his influential thesis, "Violence, Peace and Peace Studies" (1969). Galtung put forth a definition of "positive peace," or a state of "social justice," which can be realized in the absence of structural violence; this is in contrast to "negative peace," which is defined as the absence of direct violence. It is significant that Galtung's theory of structural violence and "positive peace," frees the question of "peace" from being an exclusive activity of the sovereign state, and reinscribes it as a social question. This attempt to re-conceptualize peace in relation to everyday social life can be seen as part of a process of democratically deconstructing and re-embedding the concept within civil society.

But such attempts were made long before the 1960's. M. K. Meyer, scholar of the international women's peace movement, has shown that a notion similar to that of "positive peace" emerged in the work of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), founded in 1919, an organization with a history of over 80 years. Meyers identifies a similar notion in the social reform school of the Movement, represented by Jane Addams and others. Addams held the view that if war and militarization could be eliminated, domestic social problems could be resolved and progress toward "equality, social fairness and prosperity" could be made.

The symbol of the Women's International

League for Peace and Freedom

I would like to pose the following hypothesis. As is well known, following the UN Decade for women (1976-1985) there has been a remarkable development in the transnational women's movement. This is also closely related to the position of women in the political space of the modern nation state. From early on in the women's movement, transnational activity, apart from the framework of the nation state, has been evident. This transnational political space of the women's movement--at a time when women still did not have the vote--was a rare place in which women could be independent, active citizens. Here, I would like to suggest that there is some similarity with transnational women's movements of the late 20th century.

Still limited in their participation in the political processes of nation-states, women have transcended the state borders to mobilize resources and gain legitimacy in accordance with transnational standards, and through this, have interjected vitality into local women's movements. Compared to pre-war transnational alliances, those formed after WWII show the positive effects of the accumulation of greater systemic and organizational resources, as well as the larger role of NGOs in world politics since the mid-1970's.

It is in this context that I will examine the process by which the concept of "peace" has been reconceptualized from the perspective of gender, and will ask what significance this has for peace studies. I will focus on the emergence of "Violence against Women" (VAW), both as a new concept that has evolved out of the transnational feminist movement in recent years, and explore what implications this wider recognition of VAW as a policy question for governments and for the larger international community has had for peace studies.

In Japan, following the establishment of the Domestic Violence Prevention Law in April 2001, wider media attention has been given to domestic violence as a form of violence against women. But the problem is still not understood as one of women's rights in relation to the family, which is in turn linked to society in general, as well as to the state and to relations between states. As with sexual harassment, the tendency has been to view it only in relation to the social image of concerned institutions, or as a matter of crisis management; there is also a tendency to minimize the issue by explaining it as "traditional culture." In reconceptualizing the notion of peace from the perspective of gender, I want to underscore the importance of understanding violence against women as a key to understanding numerous forms of structural violence, from domestic violence to sexual harassment, as well as sexual violence in war.

2. The Emergence of the Concept of VAW and its Evolution as a Policy Issue in the International Community

A Critique of the Ideology of the Division of Public and Private Spheres

It is interesting to note that Galtung makes use of the example of "a husband (who) beats his wife" in his discussion of the distinction between personal and structural violence. This is the only reference to gender in his thesis. Galtung defines personal violence as that in which the perpetrator can be specified, adding that it is thus "direct" violence. In contrast, in the case of structural violence, the perpetrator may not be easily specified, thus making it "indirect violence." However, these notions of personal and structural violence are not the same as those hypothesized by feminists who have been developing the concept of Violence Against Women.

For example, in contrast to Galtung's definition of structural violence as "indirect violence," in which the perpetrator cannot be specified, many forms of VAW, from domestic violence to sexual violence in war--can be identified as direct forms of violence. These direct and personal forms of violence emerge against a background of power relations between men and women that often involves a gap in distribution of resources, and therefore, can also be viewed as structural violence.

Similarly, there is a gap between Galtung's use of the notion of "personal" and that seen in second wave feminism. For women, the family has been a place where, through the labor of love, biological and social reproduction are secured, and women's subordination to patriarchy in the new garb of modernity has been cultivated. In this way, in modern civil society, the asymmetrical positions of men and women, have interwoven to create a striking "gender gap" in political strategies that can be used in public and private spaces. It was second wave feminism that pointed clearly to the political conclusion of this gap as "sexual politics."

In this way, for second wave feminism, the notion of the personal does not refer to a specific individual, but to a space where, from a new perspective, intimate personal and private power politics can be re-interpreted. Over the last two decades this notion has begun to gain recognition by nation-states as well as at the international level.

One of the fruits of the emergence of the concept of VAW is the critique of the ideological division of the public and private spheres. Until the 1980s, the phenomenon of VAW was viewed in most countries as an issue confined to the "private" sphere, and it was difficult to make it a public policy issue. It was thought to be a matter in which the state should not intervene, or as a part of the customary culture of the community concerned. But in the 1990s, building on insights gained through debates at the United Nations in the years 1975-1985 and subsequently through the work of numerous NGOs, this situation changed rapidly. In 1992, the

UN Commission on the Status of Women designated "gender-based violence" as a "form of discrimination which seriously inhibits women's ability to enjoy rights and freedoms on a basis of equality with men. (Advisory #19) But this referred only to domestic violence and sexual harassment, and did not yet touch on gender-based violence in armed conflict.

In 1993, the 2nd International Conference on Human Rights held in Vienna included VAW within the framework of international human rights discourse, partly in response to the 16-day campaign organized by a coalition of NGOs under the slogan "Women's rights are human rights." In March 1994, the UN Commission on Human Rights appointed Radhika Coomeraswamy for a three-year term as a Special Rapporteur on VAW, as part of the Commission's decision to work towards the elimination of violence against women by addressing women's rights at all levels of the UN organization. Coomeraswamy's 1996 report, along with Gay McDougall's 1998 report to the UN Sub-committee for the Prevention of Discrimination Against Minorities which cites "organized rape, sexual slavery or similar forms of slavery" as violations of human rights, helped pave the way for the demand that the Japanese state take responsibility for the 'military comfort women system," and provide compensation to former "military comfort women."

3. Gender and "Positive Peace"--Towards a "Transversal/transnational" Politics of Peace

The delineation and growing awareness of the concept of VAW as well as its implementation has led to the recognition of VAW by the international community at various levels of human rights policy. This in turn has facilitated the redefinition of "peace" from the perspective of gender. The VAW concept which originated in the critique of the ideology of the division of public and private, has also played a vital role in reaffirming the notion of "positive peace" from a gender perspective. Here, we might ask how this relates to the more classic concept of peace as pertaining to relations between sovereign states.

As stated above, peace has been understood in a "negative" sense to mean, basically, the absence of war. Furthermore, in discussions of alternatives to this notion, "positive peace" has primarily been identified as an issue of social justice within one society, in one state, again in relation to the concept of "negative" peace, as the absence of war between sovereign states. But the notion of "positive peace" need not be limited to social relations within the society of one state; it can also be discussed from the perspective of justice between states.

"Negative peace" can be viewed as not only the absence of war between sovereign states; it is also possible to interpret it as the cessation of direct violence within the society of one state. Thus, we might identify at least four areas for consideration by Peace Studies: 1) positive peace/structural violence within one nation state, 2) positive peace/structural violence in relations between sovereign states, 3) negative peace/direct violence within one nation-state, and 4) negative peace/direct violence in relations between sovereign states. Up to now, discussions of peace have been restricted exclusively to the fourth area. The perspective made possible by the concept of VAW enables us to more clearly recognize other areas worthy of attention and analysis.

The contribution of the transnational women's movement through this process of defining VAW and establishing it as a policy issue, however, does not end here. The truly epoch-making nature of the VAW concept can be seen in the way it has drawn attention to a unified principle underlying diverse levels and forms of social relations, from the family, society-at-large (including diverse ethnic groups, religious communities, etc.) to nation-states, (and formations of nationalism), like layered Russian dolls. In other words, it makes visible the structural nature of multiple layers and forms of patriarchal domination. While seeking the reconstruction of both private and public spaces, and the relativization of the ideology of the division between public and private within one society as conditions for the elimination of VAW, at the same time this process has made it possible to discuss the ideological function of such basic assumptions as the impossibility of infringing upon a state's sovereignty, the principle of division between internal and external affairs, and the diplomatic privilege of the principle of non-interference in the affairs of another country.

Examples of all of these can be seen in the Violence Against Women in War Network (VAWWNET) War Crimes Tribunal, held in Tokyo in December 2,000. This people's tribunal was conducted with two objectives in mind. The first was to examine the "military comfort women system'--understood as a form of "sexual slavery" instigated by the Japanese military--in light of contemporary international law, with the aim of identifying the point at which it is possible to call these "war crimes," and to ask who was responsible for those crimes. The second aim was to demand that legal responsibility be taken for VAW in areas where armed conflict is occurring all over the world today. As this was a People's Tribunal, it could not be legally binding, and as it sought to determine the responsibility of individuals who were no longer living and linked individual criminal responsibility to the state, it was an attempt that did not necessarily fit into the judicial framework of the nation-state. According to Kim Puja, in fact, the purpose of the tribunal departed from that of passing sentence or delivering punishment. Rather, its aim was to "bring/pass judgment" in the public domain, in order to restore justice to the women who had virtually no hope of realizing it within the framework of "common sense" in the legal system of the nation-state.

Japanese Soldiers flocking to a "comfort station" set up in Nanking, on New Year's Day, 1938.

Originally, the problem of violence against women under the "comfort women" system had been overlooked in the public domain. Problematizing it in the public domain in itself signifies a redefinition of the relationship between domestic and international law, as well as that of the framework of the division between public and private. Because of this, the Tribunal itself, involving women as citizens, became an agent in the process of realizing law, not only criticizing the "common sense" of International law, or the right to trial of the state, but also embodying an actual practice of legal reconstruction, while transcending national boundaries. Thus, it clearly becomes a site at which "borderlands" issues which cannot be understood within the framework of the present sovereign state system are discussed. Herein lies a critique of the very framework that rigidly distinguishes between internal/domestic and external/international relations and that takes the sovereign state to be the basic component in the structure. By highlighting the problem of what falls "in between," the people's tribunal establishes a place where the concepts of justice and peace can be re-constituted.

At the same time, in attempting to recover justice for former "military comfort women," a conscious attempt was made to overcome the tendency to distinguish between those victims/survivors who had previously worked as "public prostitutes" and those who had not. Such a distinction (complicit with dominant patriarchal values) has resulted in creating a division between them on the basis of such experience, thus separating those who were thought "worthy of rescue/support" from those who were not. Kim points out that this dichotomous view of the survivors was not only prevalent among those opposing the tribunal, but was also deeply ingrained, even among some activists and scholars supporting it. The fact that the case of Japanese nationals who had been public prostitutes was taken up at the Tribunal this time, meant not only that justice for these women was recovered in the public domain, but also, importantly, that the "sexual double standard" that has been justified and cultivated in private spaces was placed in a more objective perspective and was openly challenged.

The experience of the People's Tribunal clearly shows that it is pointless to view women ahistorically, or to attempt to discuss patriarchal domination as if it were separate from nationalism and colonialism. VAW, especially that which occurs in armed struggle, makes vividly clear that patriarchal domination and nationalism--or any similar form of comprehensive group unity--are inseparable. Thus it becomes even more imperative to approach the problem in an integrated way. Kim states that "only through fully facing the responsibility of the State, will it be possible to transcend the State." Only through examining the different dimensions of nationalism, gender or class, and their mutual relations in a thoroughgoing way, and through fully accepting the points where they conflict, while attempting to cross the boundaries that separate them, remaining aware of the vantage point of the other as a means to reinterpret one's own position--only then will "positive peace" become possible. Such forms of dialogue are referred to by Nira Yuval-Davis as neither universalism nor relativism, but transversalism.

I have focused on the transnational women's movement and the process of defining the VAW concept, one which extends throughout both private and public spheres, as an example of the reconstruction of the concept of peace from the perspective of gender. But this movement has not evolved in isolation. For example, the movement and debate concerning the social value of unpaid work is another example of the reconstruction of social justice in the field of "labor." In the movement for the establishment of an international criminal court, we can also see the emergence of new transnational citizens' movements which seek justice across borders.

To fully comprehend the historical significance of the work of engendering the notion of peace, it is necessary to understand it as part of the process of picking away at the seams of the sovereign state system by various transnational activist subjects, including the women's movement, in search of positive peace that has taken place in the last quarter century.

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