

## **African Feminists Emphasize Key to Global Peace**



A banner at the recent International Feminist Peace Congress in Ghana. (H. Patricia Hynes)

*“The days when one could claim that the situation of women had nothing to do with matters of national and international security are, frankly, over.” —  
[Valerie M. Hudson](#)*

On the eve of World War II, the iconic writer Virginia Woolf responded to a male attorney’s question about how to prevent war. The key, she replied, is that women must be educated and able to earn a living. Only then, once they were not dependent on fathers and brothers, could women possess “disinterested influence” to exert against war. The man’s question, she continued, is “how to prevent war.” Ours is, as she put it in “[Three Guineas](#),” “Why fight?”

Peace and the security of nations are powerfully linked with the equality of women, though it is the rare male power broker—whether a diplomat or military liaison—who acknowledges this. I traveled to Ghana recently to participate in the International Feminist Peace Congress, organized by the [Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom](#) (WILPF). My interviews—with Western women prior to the congress and with African women and a few men during their sessions on feminist peace in Africa—reinforced the mounting conviction that the fate of nations is tied to the status of women.

WILPF members from the war-ridden Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) grasp the totality of this conviction. The congress pulsed with vibrant color and bold geometric designs woven into African clothing, wall hangings and tablecloths. Wearing traditional apparel mixing electrifying color and patterns and emblazoned with “Rien sans les femmes,” (“Nothing without women”), DRC members elaborated to me: “We mean everywhere throughout the world. If women are not involved, nothing of critical use to the world will happen.”

While preparing for the conference, two dichotomous realities claimed my thoughts. The first: Feminist revolutions to gain human rights and equality for women have freed and saved the lives of millions of women and girls—without weapons, without fists, without a drop of blood spilled.



Summit representatives from the Democratic Republic of Congo. (H. Patricia Hynes)

The second: Hundreds of millions of women have been injured, harmed and killed by patriarchal institutions and by misogynist men. Why are they targets? Because they are women. How are they attacked? With weapons and rape in war, with fists and rape at home, through the commercial sex trade and through the slow, gendered violence of personal and public inequality.

Peace is quintessentially a woman's issue, most clearly when the continuum of male violence against women in its private, social and structural dimensions is grasped. "That continuum of violence," British author Cynthia Cockburn relayed to me by email, "persists along a scale of force (fist to nuclear bomb); space (the home, the street, the village, the city, the battlefield and the nation); and time (pre-war, wartime and post-war)."

"Here's where gender comes in," she continued. "There is no escaping the tendency of men and masculinity in most if not all cultures to feature as actors in violence, women as acted upon. And you can't expect a government that promotes and pays for the shaping of men as war-fighters (often condoning rape as a weapon of war) to foster a civil culture in which male violence against women is noticed, deplored and punished as it should be."

Recent, groundbreaking analysis validates these convictions.

A team of researchers, including security studies experts and statisticians, has created the largest global database on the status of women.

Called [WomanStats](#), the database enables researchers to compare the security and level of conflict within 175 countries to the overall security of women in those countries. Their findings are profoundly illuminating for global security and world peace. The degree of equality of women within countries predicts best—better than degree of democracy and better than level of wealth, income inequality or ethno-religious identity—how peaceful or conflict-ridden their countries are. Further, democracies with higher levels of violence against women are less stable and more likely to choose force rather than diplomacy to resolve conflict.

Violence against women is an invisible menace underlying local, national and international politics and security. It “has a causal impact on intra- and interstate conflict,” WomanStats researcher Mary Caprioli told me. Her colleague, Valerie Hudson, reframed the prospective central finding of their study: “Increasing gender equality is expected to have cascading effects on security, stability and resilience” within a country and internationally. What are the universal indicators of equality and inequality of women in a country, as compiled in WomanStats? On a personal level, they compose the multifarious forms of violence against women, including sexual violence, sex trafficking and prostitution; genital mutilation; sex-selective abortion, female infanticide and neglect of girls because of son preference; and preventable maternal mortality.

Consider this staggering finding calculated by the creators of this comprehensive database: *More lives were lost in the 20th century through violence against women in all its forms than during all 20th century wars and civil strife.* Yet, while thousands of monuments throughout the United States honor those who gave their lives for their country in war, [only one](#)—the first of its kind—is currently being planned for women who lost their lives giving birth to the country’s children.

Personal and family status law further adds to female inequality and mortality when women cannot divorce, are impoverished by divorce or stay in stultifying and violent relationships to avoid destitution. When girls are forced into child marriage, they face the grave risk of complications from [pregnancy and childbirth](#), which is the major cause of death globally for

teenage girls aged 15 to 19.

Inheritance and property laws that deprive women of resources comparable to those inherited by their brothers and husbands ultimately impoverish women, which is a form of economic violence. Because women's reproduction and care for children and extended family are not compensated, women are cheated of savings, pensions and Social Security. Consequently, the greatest risk factor for being poor in old age is having been a mother, according to WomanStats researchers.

Rampant discriminatory workplace policies that deny women equal pay for equal work and merited promotions are societal forms of economic violence against women. Worse for working mothers in many countries is the persistent "[motherhood penalty](#)"—whereby they are further set back financially by lack of paid parental leave and government-funded child care.

At the structural level of governance, the glaring absence of women in government as well as in international bodies such as the United Nations at every echelon, particularly the highest, robs women of power and, consequently, robs the world of security. Currently, only [20 women](#) hold the office of head of state or head of government, a mere 6.3 percent versus 93.7 percent of male international leaders.

Ironically, the United States, touting itself as a beacon of democracy, required a quota of 25 percent women in the legislatures of countries in which it has waged war, Afghanistan and Iraq. Yet the U.S. languishes at just 20 percent in its own legislature. Worse, despite its narcissistic identity as "exceptional" and "necessary" for the world, it has never elected a female president. American political operatives were accused of deliberately undermining 2016 presidential candidate Hillary Clinton, for reasons that were in part [misogynist](#). The paucity of women in U.S. governance no doubt correlates with the rate of maternal mortality (the highest among industrialized countries); with rampant sexual harassment exposed by the #MeToo movement; and with a dismal rating on the 2018 Global Peace index—[121](#) out of 163 countries ranked.

What effects do women have on issues of power and national security? Nearly 200 women in politics surveyed in 65 countries agreed that "[w]omen's presence in politics [increases](#) the amount of attention given to social welfare, legal protection, and transparency in government and

business.” Four-fifths believed that the presence of women in governmental positions restores citizens’ trust in government.

Evelyn Murphy, former Massachusetts lieutenant governor and secretary of environment, concurs. “Women typically run for public office and accept high-appointed government positions because they see problems they want to fix,” she told me. “Men tend to run for the sheer competition of the campaign, as well as [the] perceived glamour of an office.”

“The women with whom I worked,” she said, “brought to public governance their experiences in their families and the community institutions that support their families. That experience is deeply rooted in inclusivity. They exercise their power *with* others rather than over others.” She cited recent advances in Massachusetts’ public policy for gender equity in salary and paid family and medical leave: “They were propelled by women in government. Men were involved. But women were the driving force.”

Studies of women in leadership in public and private sectors have concluded that women in high-level positions and on boards deal more effectively with risk, focus more strategically on long-term priorities and are more successful financially. Experimental studies of women and men negotiating post-conflict agreements have found that all-male groups take riskier, less empathic and more aggressive positions. They also break down more quickly than negotiations that include women. Further, men are more satisfied with decisions made with women involved than those made by all-male groups.

Given these factors, why aren’t women equally represented at every peace negotiation (as the U.N. Security Council Resolution 1325 calls for), from Afghanistan and Israel/Palestine to the Democratic Republic of Congo? Lawyer and mediator Ayo Ayoola-Amale, one of the conveners of the Ghana peace conference, underscored the crucial potential and impact of women in peace negotiations. “The Liberian 2011 Nobel Prize laureate, Leymah Gbowee, together with Christian and Muslim women, pressured warring parties into the 2003 negotiations that eventually ended years of horrific war in Liberia,” she told me. Reinforcing Evelyn Murphy’s experience in government, she continued:

*“Research has shown that where women’s inclusion is prioritized, peace is more probable, especially when women are in a position to influence*

*decision-making. The reasons for this are not far-fetched: Women constantly bridge boundaries and build alliances for peace, they promote dialogue and build trust. ... Women take an inclusive approach, whether it is [to] stopping conflict, contributing to peace processes or rebuilding their societies after conflict or war.”*

Guy Blaise Feugap, director of WILPF Cameroon’s communications and disarmament programs, explained to me the root of his commitment to feminist peace. “In my family, there was much domestic violence. Since I was young, I wanted to work against violence against women and on behalf of peace,” he said. “Micro inequalities grow into macro inequalities, and I had the conviction that women are necessary for my country’s development and the construction of peace. Women are excluded from high-level decision-making, and I am committed to working for their inclusion.” A teacher of Spanish and English, Feugap has also written two novels with this core theme.

Nozizwe Madlala-Routledge, former member of parliament and assistant secretary of defense in the post-apartheid South African government, has turned the crucible of her experience into a lifelong commitment to equality for women in political decision-making. “The end of minority white rule,” she told me, “did not end patriarchal, militarized rule. You enter office to change government, and government changes you. Being elected to office is not enough; women and men of integrity must transform government.”

Madlala-Routledge, a seasoned veteran of male politics, laid out a strategic plan of action to the international conference audience. The components include building the progressive feminist movement, focusing particularly on young women; using our electoral power to elect “gender-sensitive women and men of integrity;” working to “transform political parties so they promote women and feminist leadership;” and “demanding greater transparency” in the financing of elections.

“Rien sans les femmes—Nothing without women” was a common thread throughout her stirring opening speech.

Peacemaking within and among nations needs strategic and strong allies, yet nearly half the human race is overlooked. “Enough of paper talk,” protested many African female speakers, exasperated by the exclusion of women from national peacekeeping and post-conflict resolution negotiations.

Having won gains for their equality and human rights without weaponizing their battles, women have a history of strategic intelligence that governments and international bodies, such as the U.N., urgently need, particularly given ominous current trends. Among these are the Trump administration's goal of unleashing the U.S. global arms trade from policy restrictions; the decline in peace in this decade as measured by the Global Peace Index; the decline in democracy, with one-third of the world living in backsliding democracies in 2018; the stagnation of women and young people gaining high government positions; and crushing capitalist trends in income inequality.

Unless societies transform themselves with an analysis of the status of women's equality and act decisively to empower women, they will persist as repositories of male ambition, male privilege and male power. This toxic mix—as women's experience and empirical evidence support—dooms the future of national and international security.

Our conference opened with a few minutes of silence to honor the great Ghanaian statesman, peacemaker and former Secretary-General of the United Nations Kofi Annan, who had died that morning. His words from many years ago embody the core message of this momentous African women's feminist peace conference: "There is no policy more effective in promoting development, health and education than the empowerment of women and girls ... and no policy is more important in preventing conflict or in achieving reconciliation after a conflict has ended."

In closing, traditional drumming and dancers drew many to their feet and into dance lines. "Arise women of Africa, women of the world," intoned one speaker. "Let a few hours here in Ghana resonate through Africa and the world." Feminist peace in Africa is on the move.