

Women as Movement Builders: Building a World Fit For Children

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In every major American and progressive political and social reform movement, women have always played a critical role, often in the background, employing organizational, communication, quiet leadership, and fundraising skills. They are quite often the glue that holds not only our homes together, but our congregations, institutions, and communities. I grew up in a household where my mother, who was a true leader and entrepreneur—the choir director, church organist, founder and head of the mothers' club, a pillar of the missionary society—was such a partner with my father, who was the pastor of our Baptist church. The church could not have run without her and the circle of formidable women she organized. I was so blessed to grow up in a household with a true partnership between a mother who taught me how to organize and mobilize communities and help keep institutions running and a father who made it clear that my sister and I were expected to achieve as much as, or more than, my three older brothers. Just as our church could not have functioned without

my mother, most churches and religious institutions would collapse today without women who provide the quiet human infrastructure to keep them going.

Women's leadership around the world reflects this pattern, slowly but surely transforming their communities and countries into places where food, shelter, and economic opportunities can be found. The Children's Defense Fund (CDF) has convened over a dozen meetings over the last two years to see if we can create a powerful global sisterhood of women committed to building a world fit for children in the 21st century and third millennium. September 11th has made building a strong voice for nonviolence and for peace with justice more urgent than ever.

Women in business, politics, education, media, science, and the faith community have gathered together to explore the possibilities for bringing their powerful resources to the work of protecting the future for children. One of our challenges is to weave a network of women of different colors, faiths, and income groups together into a coherent effort to find common ground. CDF has focused on children as the healing agents for community and movement building. I was really moved by the words of my dear friend, the former Minister of Women's Affairs in Iran. In New York when the Islamic fundamentalist revolution occurred, she found that she no longer held that position and that her fellow female cabinet member had been killed. A woman of deep spirituality and wisdom, she said that the key question for us to consider as women is how, in an age of modernity, do we hold onto spiritual and traditional core values which are important to us, to our children, and to our families in a world so driven by power, money, and violence?

I think the times compel all of us to examine more deeply life's meaning. Why are we here? This is an incredible moral moment in history to be alive. Few men and women have been blessed to experience the beginning of both a new century and a new millennium. How are we going to say thanks to God for the earth and the nation, world, and children entrusted to our care?

The 20th century was an era of stunning American intellectual

and scientific achievement. We earned 168 Nobel Prizes in science, sent humans to the moon and spaceships to Mars, cracked the genetic code, amassed tens of billions of dollars from a tiny microchip, and discovered cures for diseases, which give hope to millions if they can access treatment. We can transmit information faster than we can digest it and can buy anything we desire instantly online in our global shopping arcade. Wouldn't you think that we would make the commitment to figure out how to teach all of our children to read by the third grade and develop the moral and common sense to invest in all of our young who are our future? In America, a child drops out of school every nine seconds.

Are we pursuing the right priorities and should we be reassessing our choices? This is a time for new questions as we face a churning new world order that is struggling to be born and where there are no clear road maps. Isn't this an opportunity to build new paths and highways of hope, and bridges between those that have too much and those that have too little?

Changing rules of doing global business are creating new questions as well as challenges and opportunities. Who will gain and who will be left behind? Will the life chances of poor women and children be enhanced or exploited? Will powerful special interests eviscerate or respect democratic nation-states' decision-making processes? Will the changing nature of work to meet the demands of the new global economy strengthen or weaken job security, family, and community? Will cultural homogenization and corporate branding contribute to or detract from the rich diversity of our nation's and the world's people? How can we close the spiraling gap in health, income, and education that divides the rich and poor in the U.S. and in the world? Can we have better balance between the welfare of children and welfare of corporations? Can we ensure that everybody has a stake in building safer communities and nations? Dr. King was very clear about human indivisibility and how no person or nation is an island. And we all have to find ways, in our global village earth, of building a sisterhood and brotherhood to instill in our children a respect for human life. This has never been more urgent. So as

we face a new century, I hope we will look to some basic questions and finish the unfinished business of leaving no child behind in our own nation and in the world.

It is morally unacceptable that an American child is born into poverty every 46 seconds in the richest nation on earth. It also lacks common and economic sense. How many more prisons can we build? How many more children can we support in the overwhelmed juvenile justice system? We can prevent and eradicate child poverty and be a living mirror for what we would like to see in our world. It is not acceptable that we lead the world in health technology and let 9 million children go uninsured, 90% of them in working families. I'm proud that senior citizens receive Medicare, but I think every child should have a health safety net from birth. Through raised women's voices we can assure this.

It is shameful that an American child is abused or neglected every 11 seconds. We must place a priority on strengthening families and instilling an ethic of non-violence and new ways of resolving conflicts in our families, schools, and communities. Gandhi said women had a special role in teaching others to reject violence and that "the more I became non-violent the more I became like a woman." As the bearers and nurturers of children, we have a message to give to the world, particularly at a time like this. We should speak up against the cultural glorification of violence and habitual reliance on violence as the way to resolve disputes. It is not acceptable that one of our children is killed by guns every three hours and that we have lost 90,000 children to gun violence in our nation since 1979. What has happened to us that the killing of children has become routine not only here but all around the world? We have not seen or chosen not to see the invisible but relentless chronic toll of child deaths by gunfire. One of the things that I hope will come out of the tragedy of September 11th, which makes us all feel so vulnerable and without safe haven in the face of random terrorist violence, is that we might care and have compassion and be moved to action for those children who live in war zones in our cities year in and year out; children who will grow up in families who have never had a

sense of safety, permanence, and inclusion in our country. I hope that we can build bridges to those communities who feel daily what we have been feeling over the last year.

I started the Children's Defense Fund and its parent public interest law firm—the Washington Research Project—to try to pick up where Dr. King left off. I was moved the day after his assassination to go out into the public schools in Washington, D.C. to urge children not to riot or participate in the looting because they risked losing their future. A little boy about 11 or 12 looked at me straight in the eye and said, “Lady, what future? I ain't got no future.” I have been trying to respond and prove wrong that boy's truth for 30 years. I never dreamed it would be so hard.

The Sunday before he was assassinated, Dr. King spoke at the Washington National Cathedral. He told the parable of Dives and Lazarus. He said that Dives did not go to hell because of his wealth. Dives went to hell because he refused to see and respond to his brother. Dr. King said that America had all the resources it needed to eradicate poverty and he called for a Poor People's Campaign. The question was whether or not we had the will to do it.

At the time of Dr. King's death we had 11 million poor children. We have made great progress in dramatically decreasing the poverty of senior citizens since 1968, but we now have 12 million poor children, 70% of whom live in working families. We have an economy that has nearly tripled since Dr. King's death. I think it is time to build a movement to answer his call to end poverty, especially children's poverty, in the richest nation on earth.

Our mission and strategy for doing so is the comprehensive Act to Leave No Child Behind®. It lays out, in twelve titles, what any great nation can and must do for its children: provide health care; end hunger, poverty, and homelessness; prevent and alleviate child abuse and neglect; invest in quality Head Start, child care, and early childhood education and in good schools rather than in prisons after children get into trouble—all common-sense measures for which we have wonderful models. It is not to be confused with the single-issue, underfunded Bush “No Child Left Behind” education bill. Ours is a big vision that we can all rally behind.

Now we must mobilize to make it a reality, and I think women are going to play a special role. One strategy we're using builds on an earlier witness of women in the 1960s—Wednesdays in Mississippi. During the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer, we heard much about the college students who helped open up Mississippi's closed society but little about a quieter witness of presence. Dr. Dorothy Height and Polly Cowan, then the wife of CBS's president, recruited a “Cadillac crowd” of women across race and faiths, including the National Council of Negro Women, The National Council of Jewish Women, and Catholic women and began Wednesdays in Mississippi. Very quietly, they would go down to Mississippi on Wednesdays and meet with Black and White women trying to build bridges for racial understanding. There was a great gap between women on both sides of the racial aisle and a gap between poor and middle-class women. But as they began to build bridges, the program transformed the lives of the women who participated.

We are going to be mounting Wednesdays in Washington and At Home™ in order to build awareness and a persistent witness of presence for our children and for new choices in America that leave no child behind, a strategy which we hope will spill over into the world. We need to pester our political leaders every Wednesday, through phone calls, letters, emails, and visits, and send a clear message: “You are going to have to take care of our children.” Like the parable of the unjust judge and the widow in Luke 18 in the New Testament, we will come back again and again saying, “Give our children justice.” I think this is the new women's movement for children, for families, and for a new set of values in America. I really hope that you will join with us. I have enormous respect for, and have been inspired by, the women who have transformed their homes, who can juggle multiple tasks at once, and who see what needs to be done and do it. We have done that in personal ways, in our institutions, in our congregations, and in our communities. It is time now to bring these skills to bear on big public policy changes.

I love thinking back to the courageous women who were God's instruments for transforming history: Moses' mother; Moses' sister; a Pharaoh's daughter of a different ethnicity and class; and two slave midwives, Shiphah and Puah, who had been ordered to destroy all Hebrew boy babies. But these slave midwives feared God more than they feared Pharaoh. These five very unlikely social revolutionists were God's instruments for changing the course of history. So must we be today in our nation and our world by saying no to choices and values that widen the gap between the powerful and powerless and between the rich and poor. We must judge whether policies are bringing people closer together and whether we are really making sure that all have a just stake in available opportunity.

I love when I look back at the role of women closer to home too. Dorothy Day, who started the Catholic worker movement, is one of my great heroines. Her hospitality houses are still operating all over the country with people trying to bring people together. She was also on the front lines protesting against war and policies that would leave so many people poor. Jane Addams started her settlement houses and spoke out in the national and international arenas for peace and justice and a new set of values in the world. We know what Rachel Carson did in writing *Silent Spring* and read in awe about the women who were behind and bolstered the nonviolent movement of Mahatma Gandhi.

You often don't hear about the women who were such an integral part of the civil rights movement. It was Mrs. Parks who sat down and got Dr. King to stand up. It was Jo Ann Robinson who said we will not wait for the male lawyer to come back to town—we will call a boycott in Montgomery right now. In fact, it was she who said we will override the politics among more established ministers and pick her new young pastor—Dr. King—as leader. Most people don't know Jo Ann Robinson, who was a professor at Alabama A&M. She and other women like her were the backbone of the civil rights movement. We have been bringing them together and having extraordinary conversations as we plant the seeds for the next movement. I am also impressed with

the role that the young girls as well as the boys played, because children as movement builders made history. We have so many inspiring stories and so much history to build on, examples and role models, from Rosa Parks to little Ruby Bridges to the wise Septima Clark and Ella Baker. Dr. King would have been a reactor responding to events had Ella Baker not set up an infrastructure to anticipate, catalyze, and help shape them. If Septima Clark had not set up citizenship schools there would not have been a vehicle for doing voter registration. We have an enormous opportunity to take their struggle to the next stage and to help America realize its ideals for every child.

I will end with a story about Sojourner Truth, who was an illiterate slave woman. She could not stand injustice and she never gave up the chance to speak out against the second-class treatment of women or against slavery, even in a time when change seemed impossible. She had a great sense of herself as a woman and child of God, and a deep sense of the injustice of slavery, and she challenged both every time she could. One day when she was making a very fiery speech against slavery she got heckled by an old white man who stood up in the audience and said to her, "Old slave woman, I don't care any more about your anti-slavery talk than for an old flea bite." And she snapped back at him and said, "Then, Lord willing, I am gonna keep you scratching."

I think the model for us when we look at the huge task and seeming impossibility of ending poverty, of closing the gap between rich and poor, of dealing with the violence that takes its greatest toll on women and children in our own nation and around the world, is to say that we are going to be fleas for justice. Enough fleas biting strategically can make very big dogs move and very big politicians uncomfortable. My vision for building a transforming movement to Leave No Child Behind® in our nation and world is to organize a massive flea corps led by women that will bite and bite those in power with our votes and voices until justice is done for every child.