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A New Peace

Peace is often too narrowly defined as the antithesis of war. The dictionary calls it a state of tranquility, a calm where bullets once stung. No disturbances. But what if this very idea of peace has been one of the oldest, most violent weapons of oppression?

For centuries, women have been taught to be peaceful, to swallow their injustice and become the balm to society. Women have been taught silence. They were silent as they were called witches and thrown into lakes like matchsticks. They were silent as they were pushed into the funeral pyre of their husband—as part of sati, an old Indian custom designed to ensure the widow had no rights to property. They were silent as their brothers were given an education while they were given off to strange, middle-aged men.

The women's rights movement has been, at its core, a resistance to centuries of silence, a fight for a voice. A voice in the government. A voice in our future, in our education, in decisions about our bodies. A voice in what someone can do to us, and what someone absolutely cannot.

As Mahnaz Afkhami so eloquently said, women's socioeconomic development, human rights and equality are the pillars on which peace is built. But they are also the pillars that redefine these old, oppressive notions that are associated with peace. As women advance in society, peace is transformed from passivity to loud and free action. When we battle a system of oppression as old as time, a system that has wielded silence to oppress us in ways we aren't even aware of, peace cannot be silent. Peace is four million people screaming on the streets the day after President Trump's inauguration. Peace is a cacophony of voices that have been quieted for ages. In light of the MeToo and TimesUp movements, these voices are loud and brave and painful and uncomfortable. But there is peace in them too, despite the pain. There is an acceptance of what happened, an ownership of it, and a refusal to allow it to happen again. This sentiment settled wars. Societies are built on it.

As the women's rights movement evolves, it is important to carry forward this new definition of peace, this new aversion to silence. There will always be someone telling us to stop making a fuss, telling us that "women are equal now anyway," that "feminism is refractory and redundant," despite the fact that seventy percent of women face sexual violence in their lifetime and two-thirds of the world's uneducated are girls (1). There will always be someone to lull us back into that old, toxic peace of never saying anything, of never demanding change. But we must resist.

The world gets louder with each woman who becomes free. Because after all, there is no peace in simple tranquility. But there is peace—an endless potential for it—in a world that allows each one of its children the means and the voice to build their best life.

Reference

1. <http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/commission-on-the-status-of-women-2012/facts-and-figures>