

September 2007

Book Review: Champions for Peace: Women Winners of the Nobel Peace Prize

Karen E. Weekes

Follow this and additional works at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws>



Part of the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Weekes, Karen E. (2007). Book Review: Champions for Peace: Women Winners of the Nobel Peace Prize. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 9(1), 322-325.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol9/iss1/22>

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

This journal and its contents may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Authors share joint copyright with the JIWS. ©2022 Journal of International Women's Studies.

Champions for Peace: Women Winners of the Nobel Peace Prize. Judith Hicks Stiehm. 2006. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. Lanham, MD. 233 pp., incl. map, photographs, and index. US \$70 (cloth), \$24.95 (paper).

Reviewed by Karen E. Weekes, PhD.¹

Twelve women have won the Nobel Peace Prize since the founding of the award in 1903, and this book presents a comprehensive look at all these remarkable recipients, familiarizing the reader with the political climate that faced each and then tracing her life and its work. The preface features a map showing the geographical and chronological range of these awards, and the rest of the book devotes a chapter to each of the awardees. The text provides an overview of the many types of peace activism in which women have been leaders over the last 100+ years as well as the background of these women, who come from a wide range of races, classes, and educational levels.

The author, Judith Hicks Stiehm, is a respected scholar on women in the military, and here she brings her expertise to bear on female peace laureates but does not give up her political science approach, by any means. Each chapter begins with a lengthy exposition on the global and local political scene that provides the context for each woman's work. Here, smaller maps of each woman's region would have been helpful; as it is, the reader should have an updated atlas close at hand in order to follow this chronology to the extent that Stiehm's detail deserves. Located in each of these turbulent settings of strife and war is the future winner herself: sometimes, like Bertha von Suttner, unaware until middle age of her privileged position of safety; other times, like Rigoberta Menchú Tum, faced with brutal violence from early childhood; and still others, such as Aung San Suu Kyi, born into a heritage of resistance and the expectation of leadership.

Bertha von Suttner was the first female recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, which she received in only its third year of existence. She was briefly an employee of Alfred Nobel, who established the prize in his will as a way to recognize "the person who shall have done the most or the best work for fraternity between nations, for the abolition or reduction of standing armies and for the holding and promotion of peace congresses" (xi). Ironically, the industrialist Nobel thought his invention of dynamite would bring world peace because of its destructive capability—that once countries realized that war could bring complete annihilation, they would be willing to resolve issues over a peace table rather than on a battlefield. As we are all too aware in this nuclear age, the threat of annihilation has turned out to be no deterrent to aggression.

But this has not stopped dedicated men and women from striving for peaceful ends over the course of the last century. Von Suttner sought disarmament and the "end of all wars," a concept that "included class war, wars over nationality, and wars over religion" (16). Jane Addams, the founder of the Chicago settlement movement crystallized in Hull House, shared this broad vision of peace, winning the prize in 1931 as she argued for education, respect, and full democratic participation for the breadth of society. Emily Greene Balch's work in organizing the still-extant Women's International League for Peace and Freedom and other international organizations and meetings throughout both world wars helped earn her the 1946 prize.

¹ Karen Weekes is an Associate Professor of English and Coordinator of the Women's Studies Minor at The Pennsylvania State University, Abington College.

Not all recipients, however, moved on the global stage; the 1976 awardees, Betty Williams and Mairead Corrigan, were recognized for their efforts to stop violence in Ireland. From middle/working class backgrounds, both Williams and Corrigan had none of the social or educational advantages of the three previous female winners, but their grassroots organization of the Community of Peace People was prompted by their experiences of violence in their own neighborhoods and lives. Similarly, Mother Teresa, while ultimately an international figure, founded the Missionaries of Charity to serve the poor in Calcutta—an order whose mission was simply “to give care in the place that it was needed” rather than to attempt structural or political change. For over twenty years, the mission’s centers would exist only in India, although eventually they would be found all over the world. She was awarded the prize in 1979.

Alva Myrdal, like von Suttner and Addams, came to her global peace activism late in life, becoming an international diplomat working with the United Nations at the age of 47 and receiving the Nobel Prize in 1982, at the age of 80. By contrast, Aung San Suu Kyi was the daughter of a leader in the Burmese independence movement. Born into political strife (her father was assassinated when she was two), Suu Kyi has become a leader in the democratic movement in Burma/Myanmar, a powerful woman who has been constrained under house arrest for long periods despite her winning of the Nobel Prize in 1991 and a global outpouring of support for her release and fair treatment. Rigoberto Menchú Tum was also born into conditions that would set the stage for her anti-violence work: her mother was raped, tortured, and killed; her brother burned alive; and her father imprisoned and later killed as he agitated against the Guatemalan military’s occupation of the mountains and the oppression of indigenous peoples. Menchú ultimately became a speaker and activist on behalf of indigenous rights both in her home country and abroad; she was awarded the prize in 1992.

Jody Williams, the 1997 Nobel laureate, shared the award with the organization that she coordinated from its inception: the International Commission to Ban Landmines. The ICBL has had astonishing success in getting 106 countries to sign a treaty banning the use of anti-personnel landmines and committing to landmine removal from their own and other countries.

The 2003 award went to Shirin Ebadi, an Iranian Muslim lawyer who has been especially involved in protecting the rights of women and children, although she has also represented the families of victims murdered by the government regime and taken the cases of censored publishers and incarcerated journalists. These and other controversial cases have resulted in her arrest and disbarment, but she has also experienced successes such as the establishing of the Center for the Defense of Human Rights.

2004 marked the first time in history that the prize was given to females for two consecutive years. This year’s Nobel laureate was Wangari Muta Maathai, whose efforts to empower rural African women and at the same time rehabilitate depleted, deforested African lands resulted in the “Green Belt Movement,” which has since gone beyond the bounds of her native Kenya to begin changing the face of, and the prospects for, other African countries. Although the movement’s official mission is to improve livelihoods and develop environmental conservation, Maathai’s goals also encompass “giving women confidence, generating income, empowering women, and demonstrating their capacities” (207).

Obviously these women's actions evidence diverse approaches to achieving peace on a global scale and safe, sufficient, empowered lives on an individual one. The reviews on the back of the book urge us to read these essays for their inspirational qualities, but these tales are both heartening and disheartening. While the perseverance of these women is certainly motivating, the inhumanity and tragedies around which each intervened are dispiriting as they perpetuate themselves across the centuries. Each woman was ridiculed on her way to this pinnacle and generally even more ridiculed and reviled after achieving it; examples include von Suttner's being denigrated as "Fat Bertha" by her Viennese countrymen, Mother Teresa's castigation in a documentary entitled "Hell's Angel," and volleys questioning the justification for their award directed toward Corrigan and Williams (and most of these recipients). The shared ideal of all these winners, that people can live in peace and with compassion, often seems no closer than when Alfred Nobel conceived of this award at the turn of the last century, as strife in the Middle East, the Iraq War, and the crisis in Darfur, and international terrorism make clear.

But given these continuing human rights debacles, the fact that women can, oftentimes by motivating and empowering other women, achieve great works is all the more startling and impressive. Bertha von Suttner exercised the limited power of a woman in her era—social status. She hosted salons and recruited support and funds for peace activism among the elite, especially women. At the other end of the spectrum, nearly a century later, Wangari Maathai's work for the environment and the economic empowerment of women began with motivating small collectives of impoverished women to change their circumstances through the planting of trees and development of the Green Belt Movement. Jody Williams, honored for her work combating landmines, catalyzed international support for a global treaty; as Stiehm notes, ". . . the grassroots, anonymous participants in the ICBL [International Campaign to Ban Landmines] were largely women. When one can volunteer, when one can elect to act, women do so. When one has to be elected or appointed to act, as are national representatives, men predominate. Still, the lesson is that "not having one's hands on the levers of power does not mean that one cannot be powerful" (178). More often than not, these women were not born into positions of prestige or class that would put them in contact with the workings of power; they came to an awareness of the desperate need for change and linked with others, often also women, who were ready to work to improve their lives, community, and world.

In her final chapter, Stiehm discusses their contributions and distinguishes between women who self-identify as feminists and those who do not, concluding, ". . . even if these women were not feminists per se, each worked with women and each has been an inspiration to women" (222). This seems a dubious and unnecessary distinction, given that the term only came into wide use (particularly with a meaning other than "feminine" or "effeminate") in the early-mid twentieth century and considering the confusion and misperceptions around the use of the term well into the twenty-first. These awardees worked primarily with other women, from the fellow nuns in Mother Teresa's order to the residents and administrators in Hull House, to make the world a better, safer place for all its citizens, especially those who rarely bear arms—women and children—but who nevertheless are paralyzed by poverty and violence, are killed by landmines and artillery, are raped and tortured as a means of warfare, or witness the brutal destruction of their families and livelihoods to the inexorable demands of war. Respecting others'

experience and taking action to address injustices are two key feminist principles, and these women are acting in synch with feminism; Stiehm's making this distinction raises the all-too-familiar refrain of "I'm not a feminist, but . . ." and continues to cloud the use and meaning of the word.

However, this is a small flaw in an otherwise useful, accessible book that every peace activist and every feminist should have on her or his shelf. At the outset of the book, Stiehm explains, "I believe we have the responsibility as well as a capacity to change our world" (xiii), and these essays all exhibit the trials and rewards of those who are working to do just that. Stiehm believes that "many of us still seek to discover the concrete action that we can take that will advance democracy and peace" (39). Learning about others' hurdles and achievements in taking "concrete action" is an excellent place to begin our own journeys toward activism.