

“I KNOW WHO IS GOING TO END THE WAR IN KOREA: THE WOMEN”

Christine Ahn

- *The South Korean activist who organises thousands of women from North and South Korea in acts of peace*

By Luiza Bodenmüller

It all began with a dream. During a bout of insomnia, Christine Ahn read a report on the flood of the Imjin River, which cuts across the Korean peninsula and runs from the north to the south. Fearing losses on plantations, the North Korean government decided to open the floodgates to drain excess water without warning its South Korean neighbours. As a result, torrents of water gushed into the lower part of the river, causing the death of many people, including a father and a son who were fishing there at the time. Touched by the story, this South Korean woman and youngest of ten siblings had a visionary dream. In it, Christine was waiting for help on the shores of the Imjin River. At sunrise, a source of diffused light began to run through the river and shine on everyone there, showing scenes of happiness and of families separated by the border being reunited. In the dream, Christine was only a spectator. Curious to find out where the light was coming from, she followed the river upstream. “That is when I came upon the source of the light, which was a circle of women. They were mixing something in a very big caldron and then they would scoop it up with a spoon and put it into small pots that turned into light as they floated down the river”, she recalled.

Christine awoke with a start and said her husband, “I know who is going to end the war in Korea: the women.” The answer she received was, “Okay, you’re nuts. Go back to sleep.” This was in 2009 and since then, Ahn has dedicated herself to understanding the context of women’s struggles in the two Koreas and how they can contribute to the peace building process. Looking back at the past, she discovered that since the division of the peninsula in

1948, the first meeting between North and South Korean women was held only in 1991, which was mediated by a Japanese parliamentarian. Feeling the urge to do something, the activist came across a news story in 2013 on the crossing of the Korean Demilitarised Zone (DMZ) by five New Zealanders. The zone is a narrow strip of land demarcated in 1953 that separates the two countries and is controlled by United States troops under the auspices of the United Nations (U.N.). "When I saw that, I knew that women could do the same thing to demand peace and an end to the war", Ahn explained.



That was when Christine began to mobilise to build support for the crossing. Promoted by her non-governmental organisation, *Women Cross DMZ*, the proposal won the support of prominent figures such as the American feminist Gloria Steinem, Liberian activist and 2011 Nobel Peace Prize laureate Leymah Gbowee and 1976 Nobel Peace Prize winner Mairead Maguire from Northern Ireland. Together, they saw the group grow and the idea take shape. In May 2015, 30 women from 15 nationalities travelled to Korea, where they joined thousands of others on both sides of the border to demand an end to the war and the establishment of lasting peace through a peace accord. The original idea was to cross the DMZ on a peaceful walk and unite women separated by limits that did not necessarily belong to them. The undertaking, however, was blocked at the last minute, even though it had the authorisation of both Korean governments. Claiming that it was due to "security reasons", the military forces that control the DMZ stopped the march and the women had to make the journey by bus. "They said it was dangerous, but we wanted to walk on the same road that the bus took", Christine explained.

The event drew the attention of the international press and the mobilising did not stop there. In 2016, another attempt was made to reunite women from North and South Korea, this time in Bali. They were unable to go ahead with the meeting because the South Korean government banned all interaction with North Korean civilians after dictator Kim Jong-un conducted nuclear weapons tests in September of that year. The unexpected incident did not slow the fight down. At the end of September, women from 38 countries signed a letter addressed to U.N. Secretary General, South Korean Ban Ki-moon, who had declared in 2007 that "Beyond a peaceful resolution of the nuclear issue with North Korea, we should aim to establish a peace mechanism through transition from armistice to a permanent peace treaty." The group saw Ban as a strategic target for action because even though he is leaving the highest position at the U.N., there is speculation that he will run for the presidency of his country with the Conservative Party.

But not all the feminist ideas that Christine puts into practice get press coverage. In fact, her biggest challenge is daily and in her home: raising her four-year-old daughter. The activist believes that the fight for equal rights between women and men begins at home and involves providing a more “neutral” education in relation to gender. She remembers overhearing a discussion between her daughter and a friend. It was a simple conversation between the two children: boys like trains and cars and girls want to be princesses. Christine took advantage of the situation to question them on the reasons for this. She explained that both could have the same interests and gave a practical example of how gender differences are expressed in daily life: “I turned to my daughter and said, ‘if you and your friend do the same work such as, for example, making the bed, he will receive ten dollars for it and you will earn only seven’”, she told us.

The South Korean activist rejects the common idea that “feminist women want to be like men”. For her, if this were true, there would be a process of “dehumanising” women. She developed this view through her contacts with South Korean feminists, who see the origins of the masculinised and patriarchal society as being directly related to the militarisation process. In South Korea, military service is mandatory for young men when they turn 18, under threat of imprisonment. According to Christine, “these youth are trained to be more violent, more aggressive, more combative. They are dehumanised.” She affirms that the direct impact of this is the high incidence of domestic violence in the country and the naturalisation of the idea that women must be submissive.

Even so, she believes that the present is an interesting time because even with a female president (Park Geun-hye took office in 2013), women have suffered from a “deterioration” in their rights, but they have reacted to this. Christine mentioned a recent protest by sex workers who took to the street dressed as shamans to demand more rights and affirms that the occupation of public spaces like this by women is something new. Another example was the rally against the installation of an anti-missile defence system in which the front line was composed of monks and nuns. Christine also commented on the launch of a film – a lesbian thriller – that talks about the struggle of young South Korean women against patriarchy and emphasised that, “10 years ago, it would have been impossible to launch a film like this one.”

Whether at home or on the street, Christine asserts that to strengthen the feminist movement, especially the South Korean one, a language that does not exclude anyone, is accessible and facilitates the participation of all woman must be adopted. The activist also criticises the “establishment of hierarchy” among feminists, which occurs when women who are at the top or become famous because of the struggle are valued more. She believes that this behaviour reproduces the dynamics of patriarchy in the society, when in truth, the movement must be more empathetic and look at women in a more egalitarian way.

The fact is that, from time to time, Christine sees initiatives that remind her of the dream that started all of this and this becomes fuel to continue fighting. Whether crossing the

DMZ with dozens of women or stimulating her daughter's interest in "topics for boys", Christine argues that the shift from a patriarchal society to a society in which women have more space and rights requires giving greater visibility to the discussion. This would generate a chain reaction that inspires other women to join the struggle. Protagonism, then, would stop being merely a dream, as Christine experienced, to become a reality.



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