

# Peaceful Women/ Warring Men?

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**If war is politics by other means, then the different experiences of women in war are gender politics by other means. Here Jane Kelly argues that these differences can be explained by looking at the roles men and women are expected to play in society, rather than by reference to any essentially female or male characteristics.**

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The newspaper and TV images of the American woman soldier Private Jessica Lynch, wounded in combat in Iraq, being 'rescued' by US troops after days in an Iraqi hospital, raised several contradictions. Such contradictions are inherent in the relation between women and war, not least that of the active (female) soldier alongside the damsel in distress being saved by her knights in (khaki) armour.

The roles women are expected to perform within the family, as carer, helpmate and centre of the private world of the home, determine both the kinds of work we do, and many stereotypes about us. And these affect all women, whether they have families or not and whether they are single parents or not. Women's responsibilities in the family are seen as a priority. Though women now make up half the workforce in Britain, the kinds of work we do and the hours and times of day we work are in the main predicated on the need to fit in with child care and family roles.

One of the stereotypes resulting from this situation is that women are peace-loving and passive in the face of violence. By contrast, men are stereotyped as naturally aggressive, with violence simmering just below the surface. It is true that in opinion polls both before and during the recent war against Iraq a larger proportion of women than men opposed it. But of course stereotypes are just that, partial reflections of socially constructed gender roles which are then generalised to all women or all men. Reality is much more complex and ideology or dominant ideas are actively and consciously opposed by many.

The 'peaceful woman' stereotype was also a presupposition behind the hugely successful Greenham Common protests in the 1980s. Organised and largely supported by women, they spread internationally, protesting against the use of air bases for American cruise missiles in Britain and elsewhere, such as at Comiso in Italy.

Slogans like *'Take the Toys from the Boys'*, and, *'In the past men have left home to go to war. Now women are leaving home for peace'*, (1) summed up the largely essentialist basis of the protest. (2) The irony that Britain had elected its first woman Prime Minister in Margaret Thatcher in 1979, who had agreed these bases with President Reagan in the first place, did not seem to worry those who argued that women alone could fight the male aggression encapsulated in the missiles at Greenham.

Their direct action tactics, their propaganda in raising the issue of cruise missiles, their mass demonstrations and links with others such as the women fighting pit closures in the 1984-5 miners' strike, were all very successful. But they lacked an analysis of imperialism and the role of Atlanticism and its political alternatives and thus could not develop a complex understanding of how to rid the world of nuclear weapons. (3)

The Greenham protests did undermine stereotypes of women as passive, apolitical and domestic and the idea that different generations could not work together, and they had a very positive impact on the idea of direct action within the peace movement generally. While the cruise missiles were indeed eventually removed, the Americans still used British air bases to bomb Iraq in the recent war and it is not clear how much the protests contributed to their removal.

While Greenham had all the hallmarks of a very successful single-issue campaign, its essentialist political framework in the end worked against it. For without a class and anti-imperialist analysis, the women blamed the wrong people for militarism and war. Indeed some of the best demonstrations at Greenham, such as the large one on 11 December 1983, were mixed, with men in attendance, proving immediately that men as a sex were not the main problem, even if some men were!

## **Women and Violence**

It is of course true that women suffer in significantly different ways from men in violent situations. In general women are left having to deal with the lack of food and water, loss of shelter, pregnancy, childbirth and childcare. Rape is used as a weapon to terrify women and to demoralise men, for example, during the Vietnam War by the Americans and in ex-Yugoslavia by the Serbians. Nor is war the only situation where this happens on a large scale. The recent court cases in Kenya, where soldiers in the British Army are being charged with assault and gang rape of local tribal women over several decades, show how militarism dehumanises.

All these things mean that women's experience of war and violence is different to men's. But is this a result of innate female passivity and love of peace, as the essentialists would have it, or is it the result of the way societies are organised? If the former then it would seem that women can never be part of what may sometimes become violent, revolutions for example. But if the latter is the case, then women may sometimes behave in ways that make them seem more like men and vice versa.

It is of course part of our oppression that our biological capacity to reproduce the species leads in modern society to a division of labour where women are left literally 'holding the baby'. But this does not mean that we are incapable of defending our rights, including where necessary, with violence. There are many examples of women playing an active role in revolutions. In 1789 and in 1848 women in France organised demonstrations and meetings; in 1871 during the Commune in Paris, women fought alongside men, and the one of its leaders, Louise Michel, was a female teacher; in Russia in 1917 a women's demonstration with demands for 'Bread' sparked the revolutionary upsurge.

In fact a small number of women have always fought in wars, often disguised as men. Women fought in the American Civil War, on both sides. (4) In the last century and in the new one, women have played and continue to play active roles in guerrilla groups and armies fighting for national liberation. The Kurdish group, the PKK in Turkey had many women in its ranks; in the late 1970s and 1980s the FMLN in El Salvador and the FSLN in Nicaragua both had female soldiers. And anyone who has seen Pontecorvo's great film *The Battle of Algiers*, will remember the way he depicts veiled women carrying bombs around Algiers during the struggle against French colonialism. Perhaps most surprising of all, given the increasingly fundamentalist nature of Islamic

groups, the use of women suicide bombers is increasing, for example, in Palestine and Chechnya. While we might not endorse the strategy of suicide bombers it seems that sex is no barrier to such activity.

## **The Public and the Private**

The British Suffragettes in the early twentieth century - women in long Edwardian dresses - demonstrated, chained themselves to railings, threw eggs at politicians, and themselves in front of horses. These actions transformed nineteenth century stereotypes of the 'caring' woman expected to be well behaved and safe in the private sphere, into angry, rude and abusive 'public' women, making the point far more effectively than men doing the same thing.

It is often argued that women in Britain won the right to vote after the first world war, not so much as a result of the activities of the Suffragettes, but rather as a consequence of the roles they played in that conflict. And similarly that the growth in numbers of women in paid work after the second world war also resulted from their work in munitions factories and on the land. There were powerful attempts to make them return to their rightful domestic role afterwards. Much was written, for example, on the negative effects of the loss of love for young children who spent their days in the nurseries which were thoughtfully provided by government during the war, only to be closed down afterwards. This material and ideological offensive was only partially successful, for the proportion of women working outside the home has increased ever since to the present 50% figure.

These facts lead us to a second set of issues of the experience of war or conflict for women. As with the miners' strikes in Britain of the 1970s and 1980s, many women positively enjoyed their experiences of the world wars. As with the strikes, it was for many a first taste of independence, either from the parental or the married home, or from oppressive work 'in service'. In the first and second world wars, their work tending soldiers as nurses or working in factories or on the land, however arduous and tiring, gave them a sense of satisfaction and usefulness (and money) never before their lot. It gave them a freedom, and a public role, which they defended after the war when there were attempts to cajole them back into service or into domestic life, with a part-time job to fit in with childcare. The film *Rosie the Riveter* shows the same process in the United States, with women who had worked in heavy engineering and munitions factories during the second world war ending up as waitresses and cleaners afterwards. Demoted and financially worse off, they were still angry in the 1970s when the filmmakers interviewed them.

## **Women and War Today**

Of course the experiences of women in Britain and America during both world wars are not an adequate basis on which to analyse women and war in ex-Yugoslavia, in Iraq or some African states, or in liberation struggles in the semi-colonial world today. Nor was it the same for women resisting in Nazi Germany and those countries occupied by Germany in WW2. In the first examples, while there were shortages of food and goods, as well as homelessness, injury and death, the state still managed to control food supply and accommodation and there were nurseries and hospitals. Neighbours helped each other. While looting and crime was quite widespread, with some making fortunes from hoarding, society did not break down.

By contrast, in many parts of the world today, in Sudan, Somalia, Eritrea, Burundi, Congo-Kinshasa, in Iraq, Afghanistan and in the Palestinian territories, the lot of women (and children) is often unbearably difficult. While all but the oldest men and sometimes single, younger women without

family responsibilities, become involved in military action, the old and the infirm, women and children become refugees in their own land, or are forced to flee abroad. For example 5.5 million in Sudan have been displaced as a result of the twenty-year civil war. Of these 1 million are currently in exile and 2 million died of the famine which resulted. In Chechnya, 160,000 civilians have been forced from their homes, at least 20,000 of them living in tented camps in neighbouring Ingushetia. And these statistics are replicated in many countries. (5)

For these women, both during conflict and often for a long time afterwards, there is nothing positive to be gained from their experiences. Looking after the wounded, caring for children maimed by modern weaponry such as cluster bombs, producing babies deformed and disabled by depleted uranium, such women may, indeed, desire peace at any cost. But it is wrong to characterise them as passive victims. As any TV newscast shows, there are many women supporting liberation struggles, even when injury and death are the inevitable result.

## NOTES

1 Quoted in Lynne Segal, (1987) *Is the Future Female? Troubled Thoughts on Contemporary Feminism*, London, Virago, p. 165

2 There was a minority of women protesters who adopted a more socialist feminist analysis, but what was then called radical feminism and its ideologies dominated.

3 CND was in some ways politically in advance of the Greenham protests in adopting an anti-imperialist resolution at one of its conferences, and of course the fact that it took such decisions and had such conferences meant that it was more democratic than the 'networking' model used at Greenham.

4 It is estimated that about 900 women fought, and more were there as nurses, including freed women slaves. Around 80 women combatants were killed.

5 See Susan Moore, 'Women and War', *Socialist Resistance*, May 2003

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## P.S.

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