

## Are the Effects of War Gendered?

Written by Sophie Housley

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SOPHIE HOUSLEY, DEC 22 2007

In order to decipher whether or not the effects of war are gendered it is of foremost importance to consider what is meant by the term 'gender'. Therefore, primarily, I will briefly define this term followed by a consideration of what one means by 'war'. Here I discuss feminist theories regarding war with particular reference to the work of Kelly. Furthermore, I will then move on to look at the effects of war with an analysis of the effects during war, the effects during the peace-making process and, finally, the post-war impacts. Each of the aforementioned will be discussed in turn, drawing on specific examples to highlight my arguments further. Ultimately, I conclude with the argument that the effects of war are often gendered, especially when one considers war from a feminist perspective.

Firstly, it is necessary to consider what 'gender' means in order to clearly move on to decide whether the effects of war are gendered. It is stated that 'gender' is the 'socially constructed differences between men and women', in turn the social construction of masculinity and femininity (El-Bushra, 2000:66). Hague claims that 'society constructs masculinity as a bearer of power and subjugates femininity to maintain the dominance of that power through patriarchy' (Hague, 1997:51). There are some gender stereotypes that are often referred to universally. These include, with reference to masculinity: rationality, dominance, active, power, strength, economic provider, protector, public sphere, mind and culture. Contrastingly, femininity can often be paralleled with irrationality, submissiveness, nurturer, domestic, caring, passive, private sphere, body and nature.

It is now relevant to gain some further clarity on what one means by the term 'war' for there are several interpretations. 'The conventional (patriarchal) definition of war involves associations with activity, heroism and masculinity. Peace, by contrast, is often understood as the absence of war, but in more developed formulations it is also linked to the quiet, mundane, feminine' (Kelly, 2000:48). For the purpose of this essay I will focus mainly on whether the effects of so-termed 'new wars', in contemporary society, are gendered. 'Between 1900 and 1988 there were 207 conventionally defined wars, in which 78 million people were killed; two-thirds of all nation-states were involved in at least one, and ninety-three states were created- most violently- between 1945 and 1985. Yet in the West we are repeatedly told that this century has been a relatively 'peaceful' one. 'Peace' is clearly defined here as

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what happens 'at home'; but there is a lengthy feminist tradition of questioning the attribution of 'peace' to the home/household where male tyranny presides' (Kelly, 2000:48).

Questions that are central 'for feminist theory are: what are the conditions of 'war' and 'peace' for women? What is a feminist definition of war? The term 'sex war' was commonplace in feminist rhetoric and analysis in the 1970s. Undoubtedly in some contexts this was intended as a powerful metaphor, but in some of its uses the intention was undoubtedly to challenge the limited definition of war; to extend its meaning to the continuing social and political conflict between men and women' (Kelly, 2000:47). Although the term 'sex war' is not so commonly used today 'the locating of gender relations as ongoing sites of conflict suggests that we should understand sexual violence in situations of national/civil armed conflict, as expansions in location, forms and intensity, as the intersection of two conflicts informed by, and constructed through, gender' (Kelly, 2000:47-48).

I now take into account the effects of war during wartime with specific reflection on the example of Bosnia-Herzegovina. There are many examples detailing the horrific treatment of women during wartime whereby rape is often administered in a brutal and aggressive manner, more frequently than not, to symbolise the invasion of a certain territory. Kelly asserts that 'women's bodies are constructed as both territory to be conquered and vehicles through which the nation/group can be reproduced' (Kelly, 2000:50). 'Much of the theorization of rape comes from Western feminist thought' thus Hague goes on to argue that rape is 'an alliance of masculine sexuality's aggressive, violent and dominating position with respect to femininity's allegedly inherent passivity' (Hague, 1997:51). Hague claims that 'the Serb and Bosnian Serb military policy of genocidal rape presented very particular relationships of power, subordination and masculinity' (Hague, 1997:51) and consequently states that 'rape, in whatever context, is founded upon assumptions of power, domination and gender identity' (Hague, 1997:50). 'It is these wider assumptions about certain types of soldierly masculinities that provide the basis for the perpetration of these crimes' (Hague, 1997:50). Women are seen as easy targets, and symbolically represent the 'motherland'. In turn, their rape has a double meaning and impact and can be termed as 'symbolic violence' (Morgan & Thapar Bjorkert, 2006:441).

There is also extra pressure placed on women to put themselves in danger, which can often be overlooked, as they shelter, feed and clothe soldiers, courier messages secretly at the risk of getting caught by the opposition, and sometimes take part in guerrilla warfare. An example of this can be seen in the acclaimed film *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* (Loach, 2006), directed by Ken Loach, whereby a scene shows Irish women being beaten and their homes being burnt, by the British soldiers who are interrogating them for information regarding the whereabouts of the IRA soldiers. This role that women play can often be overlooked or undervalued, therefore it is important to note, as well as emphasize, it. Women and children are also often forced to flee their homes, and are sent for days walking

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to the nearest refugee camp. Once they have found security or respite in these camps, there are many accounts of further rape and maltreatment (Rehn & Johnson Sirleaf, 2002:25). The hardships women experience on the way to the camps and at the camps themselves are clearly as physically, mentally and emotionally wearing as the experiences of men (Kelly, 2000:52-53).

Contrastingly, women can be empowered during wartime as the traditional 'feminine' role is challenged, allowing them to be heads of households, work in the public sphere, and display qualities and skills which are often reserved for men or regarded as 'masculine' (Kelly, 2000:61-62). In essence, war can give many women the opportunity to prove themselves as equal and just as capable as men, in turn disproving traditional or stereotypical gender roles that have been ascribed to each sex for hundreds of years. It is crucial here to highlight the fact that women are not just passive victims of war, as is habitually the perception. Thapar Bjorkert, 'by using a specific example of caste conflicts in rural Bihar, North India', documents the way in which the Dalit women are referred to as 'the chief arm bearers who defend their interests over economic resources...and have taken the responsibility to protect their own integrity against sexual violence from the upper caste men' (2006:474). Here the notions of femininity in relation to violence are confronted and overturned.

During wartime, males make up the main part of the military and as this is controlled by the state they are often left with no choice but to fight. Many are constantly on the front line and are therefore more likely to be captured or killed. 'Most feminists who have addressed international politics have urged a focus not on war but militarisation, since it is militaristic culture which legitimises violence as a way of resolving conflicts, of establishing and maintaining power hierarchies within and between states. Until recently, the military- both in terms of troops and policy- has been a masculine preserve, and it remains an institution which re-creates and reworks gender relations locally and internationally' (Kelly, 2000:49). 'How gender is deployed in the development, and changing forms, of militarisation has become an important arena of feminist investigation' (Kelly, 2000:49). 'The content of recent debates about allowing women in combat roles and ending the ban on 'out' gay men and lesbians within the military merely serve to confirm the historical centrality of heterosexual masculinity in militarisation' (Kelly, 2000:49).

Secondly, there are the effects of the peace-making process. Men are described as having a more prominent role in the peace-making process. UNIFEM has commented that during the peace process sometimes women are not consulted, even though they are the ones that will benefit the most, and who know the situation in the host community better (Rehn & Johnson Sirleaf, 2002:64). Even those women who are higher up in the peace-making process are hindered by limited opportunities for advancement and lack of support from headquarters, even sexual harassment (Rehn & Johnson Sirleaf, 2002:64). It is also noted that sometimes in peace-keeping environments there is an

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association between the arrival of peacekeeping personnel and increased prostitution, HIV/AIDS infection and sexual exploitation (Rehn & Johnson Sirleaf, 2002:64). It is interesting here that these members of UNIFEM acknowledge that UN peacekeeping intervention can result in the aforementioned negative occurrences, however they are keen to point out that they do not want to 'undermine the UN' as they are 'acutely aware that it is not the UN peacekeepers alone who contribute to creating these conditions' (Rehn & Johnson Sirleaf, 2002:64). However, the acknowledgement that they can make the situation worse, particularly regarding the situation of women, suggests that development and aid can worsen the gendered effects of war. Moreover, during the peace process gender mainstreaming can be implemented. This can cause problems if one is forcing gender equality when a country/society is not ready for it.

Finally, it is necessary to discuss post-war effects. In some instances there are examples suggesting that women have, and can, benefit from the increased rights and responsibilities that they may have assumed during the war, such as in post-war Britain (Kelly, 2000:62). However, there are cases where women's responsibilities diminish as soon as the men return home and the skills they have displayed are ignored or overshadowed such as in Kuwait where 'women's success might be ephemeral, a product of crisis mobilisation' (Julia & Ridha, 2001:583). Furthermore, of those men that do survive war many are more likely to be injured and less employable. They return home to find many of the women in their lives have been turning traditional gender roles upside down. If these men are less able to supply or provide- which are seen as key masculine qualities- then their gender identity is challenged. In turn, many men suffer from post traumatic stress disorder or can become more aggressive with their families (Rehn & Johnson Sirleaf, 2002:16). It is claimed that 'men who have witnessed and perpetrated violence during war seem to continually act violently towards their families' thus 'research indicates that many combatants have difficulty making the transition to peace-time non-violent behaviour after returning home' (Rehn & Johnson Sirleaf, 2002:16).

To sum up, I have considered many different effects of war and in turn have given examples of the way in which war is evidently gendered. Although the effects of war can sometimes reinforce stereotypical gender roles and ascriptions, on many occasions it is evident that they are challenged, altered and, at times, completely reversed. It is clear that in time of conflict often 'a range of gendered opportunities and choices is open to individuals and groups' (El-Bushra, 2000:67). However, in some cases 'gender can take a back burner when individual lives are entrenched by violence and suffering...If questions on gender equality are raised and involve a change in mentality, then a change of mentality [is] needed in the hearts and minds of those with power' (Morgan & Yuval-Davis, 2006:434). 'The issue of violence begs the bigger question of the nature of power itself' (Morgan & Yuval-Davis, 2006:435). War is power and structural violence. Gender concerns power differentiation and gender roles and differences can often result in violence of some sort; symbolic violence as well as structural violence (Morgan & Thapar Bjorkert,

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2006:441). Overall, the power which is exerted in relation to war is one which is gendered, utilizing gender to strengthen, challenge and highlight issues of power on many levels.

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*Written by: Sophie Housley*

*Written at: Bristol University*