

Issues in the association of women with peace activism

Written by John Cai Benjamin Weaver

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'A woman's place is in the kitchen'; this well-known saying places the woman in the private sphere, out of public life and it raises a number of key assumptions when thinking about this 'woman'. We imagine her to have a husband and children, for whom she is dutifully preparing food, whilst he is at work, providing income and protecting his family. We also assume that this woman is of peace, caring and non-violent. In organising for peace, women's associations have sought to both challenge and reinforce gendered notions when it suits their purpose. At Greenham Common, women staged their 'home away from home': by performing their traditional domestic roles in the open, outside an army base, they dramatized the tension imbedded in the gendered dichotomy of peace and war (Blumen & Halevi, 2009: 978). There are now a considerable number of women's peace activist organisations operating in every continent. While many operate at a grassroots level, other have a national, regional or international profile (El-Bushra, 2007: 137). The term women's peace activism is a generalisation of the diverse and varied nature of women's groups, both in terms of their aims, methods and success. If we keep this context in mind and start to look through gendered lenses at women and peace activism, we would notice the haunting presence of certain assumptions about women, and their relationship to peace, and gendered roles within society. These hard-set stereotypes can prevent us from grasping women's peace activism in all its complexities and forms.

This essay will focus on the gendered issues of the association of women with peace activism. It will focus on analysing Essentialism, Maternalism and Feminism in connection with the assumptions of women with peace activism. Furthermore, it will utilise three case studies in order to support the gendered issues raised: The Union of the Committee of Soldiers Mothers' of Russia (UCSMR), Women in Black (Israel) and Somalia women peace activists. These particular case studies have been chosen because these groups draw on assumed hegemonic gendered roles in order to realise their goals. Thus instead of denying these groups agency, the gendered roles are a source of strength enabling them to achieve their goals. In this essay, gender will be regarded as a product of social construction rather than biological differences between the sexes (Sharoni, 1995: 22). It is important to look at women peace activists through a gendered lens because gender relations are social relations. They include the ways in which the social categories of male and female interact in every sphere of social activity which determine their access to resources, power and participation in political, cultural and religious activities (Pankhurst, 2003: 26).

The basic premise behind women's peace activism is that women refuse to accept war as a solution to solve conflicts no matter how complicated they may be (Sharoni, 1995: 125). Herein lies the first issue with the association of women with peace activism; there is a tendency to identify women as a homogenous group (Pankhurst, 2009: 27). There is a strong argument that women have a shared experience of oppression and that is fundamentally different from that of men; it is on these grounds that some believe women should identify and organise as women, with all the associated traits of femininity (Wibben, 2009: 79). This unity across political, social and economic gulfs stems from this common experience. Women peace activists believe that they have the capacity to build bridges across political divides based on an interest, borne out of their caring and social service roles (El-Bushra, 2007: 142). This illustrates a strong belief in women's solidarity, yet one of the key issues here is how can women be united across so many divisions? In reality, it is impractical to claim a shared women's experience, much as if it would be the same to claim a shared man's experience (Cockburn, 2010: 145).

Women in Black draw on traditional roles that women play in Israeli society, which are based on the essentialist notion that women are inherently peaceful. The USCMR also draw heavily on the assumption of traditional roles of

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mothers in Russian society, whereas feminist women's peace activist groups draw on the shared experience of oppression and use it to advocate societal change, because they believe that women have a long tradition of identifying female qualities with a rejection of war and conflict (Pankhurst, 2003: 20). They believe in order to have a permanent cessation of violence there must be a structural change to create a society in which women are equal to men, or dominant over, because war is caused by masculine characteristics. The issue is not simply that women's work in conflict transformation needs to be acknowledged, but that women's experiences expand the scope of peace making itself, since their activism addresses the psychosocial, relational and spiritual as well as the political and economic dimensions of conflict transformation (Mazurana & McKay, 1999).

The essentialist position understands that the innate violence of males is the root cause of war (El-Bushra, 2007: 140), it is noted that men seem almost inherently prone to violence in many contrasting social and cultural contexts. It is commonplace for the conceptualisation of femininity to include some of the 'opposite' qualities ascribed to masculinity, so that femininity becomes associated with peace and passivity (Enloe, 1989: 3). Such feminised qualities, which include seeking non-confrontational methods of conflict resolution, willingly working for the good of the collective and even remaining passive, are assumed inherent to all women (Pankhurst, 2003: 20). These assumptions have a long tradition of identifying female qualities with a rejection of war and conflict. Women are portrayed as naturally linked to peace and the home front, while men are tied to war and the war front. Arguments concerning women's biology or social conditioning suggest that they are more prone to nurturing and caring than men are. Life 'giving' precludes life 'taking' from the female character, rendering women incapable of violence, owing to a biological predisposition towards creating new life and nurturing (Mason, 2005: 740). Men are assigned the role of protectors: women and children are protected. This inherently unequal dichotomy alienates women from the conditions of their own protection and frequently forces them into passive and weak positions; this, in turn, can undermine their claims to women's rights and depoliticise their actions, especially in regard to peace activism (Mason, 2005: 739).

An essentialist view of sex differences as 'given' cannot coexist with a goal of transformative change in gender relations. It is quite clear that a woman is not inherently or irreversibly anti-militaristic or anti-authoritarian. Knowing male pacifists and women who celebrate violence rules out any view of men and women being deterministically shaped by biology (Cockburn, 2010: 143). Nor is her peaceful nature a matter of chromosomes or menstrual cycles. It is through social processes and structures that have been created and sustained over the generations, which keep women out of any political position with influence over state force (Enloe, 1989: 6). In the words of Vincent (2001: 5) 'to the extent that peace-builders draw on stereotypes of women's natural capacities and assumed biological traits, they are reinforcing rather than assisting the fundamental revisioning of prevailing relations of gender dominance which justify women's exclusion from the public sphere of work and politics on the basis of their putative special responsibilities and proficiencies as mothers'.

In January 1988, women in Jerusalem, and soon thereafter throughout the country, began holding silent vigils on Friday afternoons. The women dressed in black to symbolise the tragedy of both Israeli and Palestinian peoples and held signs in Arabic, English and Hebrew, which called for an end to the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip (Sharoni, 1995: 112). Today, Women in Black is a worldwide network of women opposing war through demonstrations. Women in Black was founded by Israeli women who have challenged both political and gender conventions (Blumen & Halevi, 2009: 978). 'The stereotypical image of Middle Eastern women as veiled, voiceless, and powerless victims contributes to the backlash against women's movements and feminist projects in the Middle East' (Sharoni, 1995: 27). Both Jewish and Palestinian women have typically been marginalised within their own societies (Mayer, 1994: 5). The involvement of women in peace activism 'ultimately gave women a greater political voice and provided them entry into formal politics (Mayer, 1994: 6-7).

By placing the term *women* in their name and displaying only female bodies, Women in Black exclude men. They demand for peace by revealing, rather than concealing, the deadly consequences of war; however, by naming its demonstration a vigil, it nevertheless adheres to women's traditional role as mourners. Death is also emphasised by their black dress, which "repeats" the movement's name while distinguishing the demonstrators on the street; being still and silent implies mourning and remembrance, while demanding public respect of the mourners. Silence both counters the population association of feminism with speech, and reinforces notions of traditional femininity, with

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women being silent in public, holding signs that speak for them. Within Israeli culture that privileges speech, silence also represents Women in Black as ineffectual political activists, however it can be seen that these choices dramatize femininity as a political-cultural challenge whilst drawing upon the essentialist construction of gender (Blumen & Halevi, 2009: 979). The Israeli women's peace movement continues to act within the social norms of patriarchal society, thus helping them to achieve their aims, but failing to fundamentally change gender norms (Deutsch, 1994: 89).

There is a strong history of women whose politicisation is owed to their motherhood, typically because something has happened to their children or they wish to protect their children from future harm. Often the women are concerned with promoting peace and non-violent policies. This is an active and claimed maternalist position. However, this is an extension of the essentialist position and it still maintains that women's political importance is only within the context of other people's claim on her socio-biological role (Gentry, 2009: 238). Very little mention is made of the women's political reasoning; instead their actions tend to be defined by their expected gender role as mothers. This assumption strongly echoes the maternalist position, which claims that women think and act differently because of their socio-biological role as mothers (Gentry, 2009: 235). This association upholds the maternalist argument that women are peaceful because of their maternal imperative (Mason, 2005: 739). There is also the social analysis critique, which suggests that the essentialist conflation of womanhood with motherhood, which seems remote from the reality of many women's and men's lives, and fails to challenge the stereotypes of masculinity and femininity which may need to be transformed if conflict is to be managed non-violently (El-Bushra 2007, 141).

Nevertheless, the concept of maternal thinking is pertinent. How else can one explain why it is that women as mothers define themselves as mothers for peace? (Gentry, 2009: 238). With this in mind, we look at the UCSMR, who emphasize their identity as mothers when organising for peace. The academic literature on maternalism would deny them agency because they are driven by their maternal imperative; however, in reality they have made a conscious decision to organise based on their maternal identities and thus they are able to achieve their goals by wielding traditional maternalist assumptions. In the First Chechen War, popular opposition to the war was widespread and the UCSMR was especially active (Evangelista, 2002: 42). They were one of the most active pressure groups in society, exposing the savage way that the authorities dealt with conscripts and casualties (Sawka, 2008: 417).

One of the most famous of their campaigns for peace was the Mothers' March for Compassion, held in March 1995. During this event, hundreds of mothers travelled to Chechnya, where they worked with local officials and Chechen military authorities to organise prisoner of war exchanges (Vallance, 2000: 112). In order to ensure their safe passage they travelled on a bus which was festooned with white flags and a banner with the sentimental appeal "Soldiers! Don't Shoot Your Mothers!" (Bennett, 2001: 362). They built bridges with the local Chechen men and women and were able to achieve their goals based on the emotive appeal of motherhood. Bennett recorded how a Chechen man, with six children of his own, expressed empathy towards the Russian mothers: "They're showing the world, and Moscow, that no one wants this war, that ordinary Russians don't want it any more than Chechens" (Bennett, 2001: 362-363).

The problem with associating Maternalism with women's peace activism is that it limits post-conflict societal reconstruction in achieving gender-balance and equality. However, in Russia the UCSMR rejects feminism outright as irrelevant in post-Soviet society. Valentina Melnikova, press secretary for the UCSMR explains: "Feminism for me is a movement for women's rights, but the thing is, in our country, nobody had rights. Why should we talk about women's rights when everyone is without rights? Nobody in this organisation thinks that women are particularly oppressed" (Sperling, 1999: 72). In other words, if men and women were both oppressed equally by the state, then feminism, which seems to divide women from men and sets women's interests apart from men's, may be seen as an inappropriate ideology.

Women peace activists, with a few exceptions, tend to label themselves as feminist organisations. Take for example *La Ruta Pacifica de las Mujeres* (Women's Peaceful Road), a statewide network in Colombia organising for an end to half a century of internal war. They identify feminism and pacifism as their two political bastions. They write of their organisation, 'these theoretical foundations have led to its recognition as a novel movement, because there have been prejudices against both of these concepts in the traditional social movements' (*La Ruta Pacifica* 2003, cited in

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Cockburn 2010, 142). The association of feminism with women's peace activism highlights that simply 'declaring peace' is not enough; certain feminists acknowledge gender differences and they have organised as women against war, with an agenda for transformative change. They recognise that to be sustainably peaceful, a society will also have to be one in which we live gender very differently from the way it is lived today (Cockburn, 2010: 153). Because of their placement in society, women are uniquely positioned to perceive the connections among different spheres of domination. As feminists they can then try to challenge the hegemonic versions of history that have kept them opposed, invisible and separated (Dajani, 1994: 51). War deepens already deep sexual divisions, emphasizing the male as perpetrator of violence, women as victim. It magnifies the distance between femininity and masculinity and enhances men's authority in a quantum leap. Therefore, this feminism sees women's subordination as more than the by-product of political inequality or an exploitative economic system. However, anti-war feminism inevitably has a wider range of concerns than this. It cannot fail to have a critique of capitalism, and new forms of imperialism and colonization, class exploitation and the global thrust for markets, since these are visibly implicated among the causes of militarization and war (Cockburn, 2010: 144).

Traditionally women in Somali society play an indirect but important part in conflict resolution. However, in the past decade women across Somalia have been deeply involved in peace promotion and peace making. Women's important contributions to ending violence and promoting peace have included formal presentations to warring parties, demonstrations, direct action, petition of politicians and elders, and provision of logistical and financial support to peace processes (Garner & El-Bushra, 2004: 139). Yet when it comes to policy-level peace consultations, or the documentation of events, women are still excluded and their contributions to peace overlooked; perhaps because their contribution has not been considered important enough to be recorded or perhaps because it is taken for granted that women will be against war. In most societies, women are seen as a force for peace and harmony. This may be a cultural construct, but the fact that women participate in war and atrocity shows that women have a choice: when women advocate for peace, it is not because they are naturally programmed to do so, but because they have made a moral choice to do so. This should make their contribution all the more valuable (Garner & El-Bushra, 2004: 140).

On the 5 October 1992, hundreds of Somali women with banners and slogans marched to the presidency and parliament building urging men to stop the war and solve the disputes peacefully. There were no women members of the reconciliation committee, as traditionally formal mediation between two warring parties is a male affair (Hassen, et al, 2004: 146). In this social setting women have much weaker clan allegiances than men since they have close links both with their own, natal clan and with that of their husbands. This means, on the one hand, that in wartime they are able to use these cross-cutting linkages for protection (of themselves and others) and to promote reconciliation, and on the other that when it comes to the hard-nosed business of inter-clan decision making, women have until recently been excluded (Garner & El-Bushra, 2004: 141). In Somalia, women's activism round the idea of a 'sixth clan', the notion that women form a clan of their own with a non-partisan agenda, led to a quota of thirty-three reserved seats for women being agreed in the current parliament (Garner & El-Bushra, 2007: 142).

It is patriarchal gender relations that predispose our societies to war. They are a driving force perpetuating war. This is not to say, of course that gender is the only dimension of power implicated in war. Women peace activists bring gender relations into the picture not as an alternative, but as an intrinsic, interwoven, inescapable part of the very same picture (Cockburn, 2010: 140). Making gender visible is one way to understand how particular ideas about identity and community, informed by certain notions of masculinity, femininity, and gender relations have become hegemonic at the expense of alternative possibilities (Sharoni, 1995: 151).

The notion of peaceful women is flawed, because women can and sometimes do engage in violence, ranging from complicity to agency (Pankhurst, 2003: 32). While most soldiers are men, a growing percentage are women at the same time, we see that the exception to the norm (Cockburn, 2010: 145). Denying women's agency is a potential outcome of a crude deployment of a gender concept in policy where all women are presumed to act in the same way and are powerless to do otherwise. Women do not necessarily speak with one voice on issues of war and peace. Clearly, they are divided by political identities and allegiances, just as men are. Women involved in peace organisations themselves testify that their commitment to peace activism is borne out of their experience in and after war (El-Bushra, 2007: 135).

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Women's roles in working towards peace have become increasingly celebrated, while their other roles are downplayed (Pankhurst, 2003: 38). The core issue with the association of women with peace activism is that it raises, and reinforces, gendered norms, through the assumptions of what it means to be a woman. In the academic literature, these assumptions of Maternalism and Essentialism deny women agency. However, it is precisely these assumptions that certain women's peace activist groups draw upon in order to achieve their goals. Yet these assumptions can damage real post-conflict societal change and do nothing to advance gender equality and ensure positive peace. Often the simple fact that women persist demonstrating *as women* is an achievement (Blumen & Halevi, 2009: 983).

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Date written: March 2011