

Feminist Antimilitarism: Patriarchy, Masculinities and Gender Awareness in Anti-war Organizing



By Cynthia Cockburn

This article is the second of the six articles to be published by the Women Peacemakers Program (WPP) during the six week *Gender & Militarism Campaign*. The Gender & Militarism Campaign advocates for awareness and action around the multi-layered connections between gender and militarism, and highlights gender-sensitive nonviolent action (people power) as a powerful alternative to address conflict.

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About Cynthia Cockburn

Cynthia Cockburn is a feminist researcher, writer and photographer based in London. She is a Visiting Professor at City University London, and an Honorary Professor at the Centre for the Study of Women and Gender, University of Warwick. Her projects are designed to contribute to social movements, particularly community activism, trade unionism, the women's movement and peace activism. Her recent work, including her book *Antimilitarism: Political and Gender Dynamics of Peace Movements* (2012, Palgrave Macmillan), focuses on gender in processes of war and peace.

This article is based on two talks by Cynthia Cockburn. The first was one she gave at the Graduate Institute in Geneva on February 25, 2013, titled "Gender Relations & Armed Conflict". The second one she gave at a panel discussion of the Feminist Collective Amargi, held in Istanbul May 26-27, 2012, and is titled "If Patriarchy Is One of the Causes of War, Feminist Gender Transformation Is Work for Peace".



If you get down deep into the messy cultural detail of armed conflict, you can ask interesting questions about its sociality. Who does what kinds of violence, to whom, why and how? When you are looking at the social dimensions of armed conflict, this opens the way to seeing gender. Gender is an aspect of the social. And so we can ask what kind of gender relations are operational here, before, during and after armed conflict—remembering that there also is a gendered element in relations *between men*, not only in those between men and women.

Gender relations, as a meta-concept, opens up interesting questions regarding their articulation with armed conflict. We can ask how the relation between men and women, between masculinity and femininity, is shaped by militarization and war, and how it bears on militarization and war. What I have heard from a wide range of women's antiwar groups, organizations and networks from all over the world, is that gender relations are partly *responsible* for our societies' tendency to wage war. It is not just that gender relations are *expressed* in war. They are. And it is not just that they are *shaped by and emerge* from war in certain forms. That is also true. But they actually contribute to the likelihood of war. They are *causal*.

What you think you can do to end war depends on what you think are the causes of war. What is it that feminists think actually causes militarism, militarization and armed conflict?

It's very simple: feminist antimilitarists say that mainstream understandings of war are deficient. They are deficient because they lack a dimension. They fail to include among the systemic causes of war the patriarchal, male-dominant, sex-gender order we live in. The mainstream analysis does not include that perception, so it cannot act on it, and that makes it less effective.

How does the mainstream peace movement conceptualize militarization and war? They see two big power systems as causes of war: economic interests (capitalism as a mode of production) and political systems (the ethno-national system of states). These two power systems are large and enduring—even if they shift and change adaptively over historical periods as they encounter new conditions. They intersect of course: a national movement may mobilize for an economic resource—the control of "its" own oil reserves for instance. Western purchasers of African minerals may exploit ethnic rivalries in the Congo. Together these twin power systems are "the problem" that obsesses antiwar movements.

What feminist antimilitarists do is direct the antimilitarist gaze towards another equally large, enduring, and surprisingly adaptive power system that is inseparable from the other two. Economic and political power is intertwined with, shapes, and is shaped by sex-gender power, patriarchy, the worldwide system of male dominance. The interests of





men as men, patriarchal interests, in addition to the interests of those who own capital, in addition to those of nationalists who profit by defining identities and making land claims, get expression in practically every major institution you can name. In business corporations, states, churches, and families, you find male power is right there functioning in, alongside and through capitalism and nationalism. They are right there in the institutions of militarism, militarization and war, likewise. Capitalism, yes. Nationalism, yes. But you understand war so much better if you take a gender lens to it. In fact you just cannot understand it fully without patriarchal gender relations as an explanatory factor.

Patriarchy reproduces itself by the arrangements society makes for the social shaping of gender—and in particular the shaping of masculinity. Feminists, of course, are particularly pointing to the significance of masculinities for the survival and reproduction of the patriarchal system, men brought up to be adequate to use power, to show their entitlement to privilege, to manifest masculine values. The creation of one generation after another of families ready to sacrifice their sons; boys addicted to computer war games like *Call of Duty*; men ready to impose their authority on women by force, to identify enemies and kill them—militarized masculinity predisposes our societies to consider war normal. It makes the establishment of peace very unlikely.

Women are shaped as people ready to play their part in a society that values the ascendancy of masculine qualities, who do not rebel against the domestic burden, who find the idea of male dominance erotic. Such gender relations not only fuel militarism, they need militarization for their full expression.

What feminist antiwar activists and researchers are saying is that a patriarchal gender order can be seen as disposing a society, a community, a country to the pursuit of its ends through armed conflict. It makes coercion the normal mode of procedure. It makes war forever thinkable. However, this is not an analysis you hear promoted in the mainstream, gender-mixed, peace movements. In such movements you can be pretty sure they are not talking about gender relations as causal in war.

Feminist antimilitarists in the peace movement are saying: our take on war is different from the mainstream movement. From our perspective as women we cannot help seeing militarist thinking, militarization of societies, the training of armies and the fighting of wars as being hugely gendered...with men and women playing largely different roles, experiencing different kinds of effects, being tortured in different ways, dying different kinds of deaths. They choose sometimes to organize separately, as women, so they can highlight the experience of women in war, and how it connects to what women experience in everyday life in peacetime.

But women organizing separately says something else as well: it says something about the gender relations inside mixed antiwar movements. Women tell me they organize separately as women in part so that they can evade the perennial struggle with the male leadership they experience in mixed organizations, to get a voice and a hearing. They are doing it so that they can choose their own strategies too—they may prefer something more creative than the antagonistic confrontations with the police that some men may relish.

So they are saying there is not just a gap in the theory of war, there is a matching gap in antiwar organizing and strategy. If patriarchy, or the male-dominant gender order, or whatever you want to call it, is a predisposing factor to violent societies, if this is one among the other causes of war, then *transformative* change in gender relations has to be seen as work for peace. And not just an optional extra, but fundamentally *necessary* work for peace.

Yet in my travels round the world researching for the book *Antimilitarism*, I met a lot of women who are tired and fed up with struggling along in the mixed movement. They feel that they are endlessly making the gender point, stressing that hegemonic masculinity is a contributory factor in militarism and war, but “the men just don’t get it”. As a consequence, very few men are actively participating in work for gender change.

For our movements against war to be effective, the men within them have to challenge gender power every bit as much as they challenge class and ethno-national power, and every bit as much as women do. What is more, they should surely see themselves as gaining by doing this. As the women’s movement has always said, feminism is not for women alone. The gender order we live in is bad for men as well as women. The war system might be thought to be especially bad for men.

So, yes, gender transformation is necessary work for peace. I have found that many women, including some of the women who choose to stay within the mixed movements, oppose war not only as people but as women. But women cannot do it alone. Men also have to oppose war in their own gendered





sense of self—as men. Saying: “You shall not exploit my masculinity for war.” The feminist struggle against a male-dominant sex-gender order is *of itself* work for peace. But it will not prevail until millions of men see their own best interests in joining it.

Further reading by Cynthia Cockburn:

- *The Space Between Us: Negotiating Gender and National Identities in Conflict* (1998) London: Zed Books.
- *The Post-War Moment: Militaries, Masculinities and International Peacekeeping* (co-authored with Dubravka Zarkov) (2002) London: Lawrence & Wishart.
- *From Where We Stand: War, Women’s Activism and Feminist Analysis* (2007) London and New York: Zed Books.
- *Antimilitarism: Political and Gender Dynamics of Peace Movements* (2012) Basingstoke, UK, and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

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