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Feminism and Peace

Source:

The Oxford International Encyclopedia of Peace

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Feminism and Peace.

In many historical periods, women, speaking as women, have issued calls for the cessation of war, basing their appeals on a variety of principles. Not all have identified their reasoning as feminist, however, and those who have done so manifest diverse interpretations of feminism.

An early representation of women's opposition to war was the Greek comedy *Lysistrata*, written in 411 bce by the playwright Aristophanes. In his drama, the women of Athens and Sparta cooperate to bring an end to the fratricidal Peloponnesian War. The script, although written by a man, is protofeminist in addressing both gender relations and wider political processes—the women's strategy in the play is not only to withhold sex from their husbands but also to barricade the public treasury—and in identifying a masculine obsession with fighting and glory as an obstacle to peace. *Lysistrata* has persisted as an inspiration in contemporary women's peace activism. An example is the struggle to end civil strife in Colombia, where La Ruta Pacífica de las Mujeres (Women's Peaceful Road) uses the slogan "No parimos hijos ni hijas para la guerra" (We will not bear sons or daughters for war).

Development of Women's Peace Movements

In Britain the first distinctively female organizations addressing peace followed the Napoleonic Wars. In 1816 Quakers founded the London Peace Society (later the National Peace Society), which soon had many "Female Auxiliaries." Two decades later women were organized in "Olive Leaf Circles"; by midcentury these numbered 150 up and down the country, with a combined membership of around three thousand (Liddington 1989).

The second half of the nineteenth century was marked by vastly destructive conflicts, including the Crimean War, the American Civil War, the Franco-Prussian War, the Spanish-American War, and the Boer War, with their death toll evoking organized protest. In 1868 Marie Geogg in Geneva, Switzerland, founded the world's first autonomous women's peace organization, the Association Internationale des Femmes (Berkman 1990). In the 1890s Austrian Bertha von Suttner founded a pacifist organization and

edited an international peace journal. For her book *Die Waffen nieder!* (Lay Down Your Arms!) and her campaigning work, she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. By the end of the nineteenth century many women of activist inclination were turning their attention to campaigning for women's rights, particularly the right to vote, and little conceptual connection was being made between women's equality and the issue of peace.

In the period of mobilization for the Great War (World War I), the suffrage movement in the United States, France, and Britain split in two. The majority of suffragists rallied to support their respective national governments, confident that votes for women would follow. The minority, withstanding the surge of patriotism, continued to link women's right to representation with a refusal of militarism and war (Alonso 1993, Berkman 1990). On the other side of the front, in Germany, two notable socialists and women's rights advocates, Rosa Luxemburg and Clara Zetkin, friends and activists in the Spartacus League (later the Communist Party of Germany) agitated against Germany's war policies. Luxemburg would eventually pay with her life, while Zetkin would be exiled to the Soviet Union.

Some months after the onset of war, the surviving feminist peace groups in the United States and Europe called a congress at The Hague, in the neutral Netherlands. It brought together 1,136 women from twelve countries, including belligerent states on both sides. The number of participants would have been greater if the British government had not refused passports to the majority of women wishing to attend the congress from Britain. The congress was an extraordinary achievement when, only a hundred miles to the south in Belgium, thousands a day were dying in the trenches of Ypres. It resulted in an International Committee of Women for Permanent Peace that sent envoys to heads of state with resolutions for a cessation of hostilities. One outcome of this initiative was the creation in 1919 of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, which would eventually have an office in Geneva, consultative status at the United Nations, and branches in more than thirty countries (Alonso 1993, Liddington 1989, Bussey and Tims 1980). In the 1930s and 1940s, however, it was difficult for peace activists to maintain unity and coherence in the face of Japan's aggression in Asia, Franco's onslaught on democracy in Spain, and eventually Hitler's aggression and genocide in Europe. These events raised the perennial question for women and men alike, of whether being a peace activist meant principled nonviolence or, when circumstances demanded, subordinating peace to justice.

Feminism and Opposition to War since the Mid-Twentieth Century

While the term "feminism" had been in use since the nineteenth century, the ideology and language of feminism gained a powerful new currency in the late 1960s and 1970s, during what became known as the movement's "second wave." One prompt to women's rebellion was their dismissive treatment by male activists in the movement against the Vietnam War and in the contemporaneous New Left. In the 1970s feminism was preoccupied primarily with women's demands concerning their own lives, but the 1980s would see a renewal of antimilitarist feminism. On 17 November 1980 two thousand women marched on the Pentagon, outside Washington, D.C., in opposition to the arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union (Alonso 1993). The following year in Britain, women established a peace camp at the gates of the Royal Air Force base at Greenham Common, in Berkshire, a site chosen for the deployment of U.S. nuclear missiles. Mass protests followed, one of which drew an estimated thirty thousand women

to Greenham. Similar women's peace camps were established at Seneca Falls in the United States and Pine Gap in Australia, and many other international links were forged, including with women of the south Pacific who were protesting the effects of nuclear tests on their islands (Roseneil 1995).

Even at this time, however, there was no necessary correlation between feminism and pacifism. Some feminists were angry that others would now, apparently, abandon the struggles of the seventies, when women had at last raised a cogent movement on their own behalf for sexual autonomy and liberation from oppression, and return to this "universal" concern of peace, once again doing the world's housework (Green, Bishop, and Alderson). On the other hand, there were and are feminists who complain that women's separating themselves from men was a betrayal of the very idea of peace (Richards) and was even fascistic (Oldfield 2000).

The women activists of the 1980s were campaigning for détente between the West and the Soviet Union. When this occurred, and the USSR disintegrated in 1991, the nature of the war threat changed. The United States, now an uncontested superpower seeking to impose a "new world order," engaged in asymmetrical warfare, bombarding opponents militarily much weaker than themselves, such as Iraq, Serbia, and Afghanistan. Meanwhile, insurgencies and repression continued in Latin America and other regions, genocide occurred in Yugoslavia, and many African countries were engulfed in bloody conflicts in which the interests of richer countries were visibly involved.

In response to these "new wars" (Kaldor 1999), women's peace activism worldwide shifted focus, spread, and intensified. A study in 2004–2005 found a wide proliferation of such organizations as far apart as Latin America, West Africa, and the Pacific countries. Some of them now termed themselves "Women in Black" (after an initiative of Israeli women against the occupation of Palestine), while others had diverse names and purposes. The potential of such women's initiatives was recognized in the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 of 2000, on "Women, Peace, and Security."

Contemporary Feminisms Visible in the Women's Antiwar Movement

While youthful feminist identification in Europe and North America diminished with the backlash of the 1980s, women in many other regions were finding that the feminist concept of patriarchy—an enduring if diverse system of unequal and oppressive gender relations—accurately described their own societies. However, differences of analysis remain and are visible within women's antimilitarist movements. For brevity they may be summarized as three: a maternalist feminism, an equality feminism, and a holistic feminism.

The representation of women as natural peacemakers and men as natural fighters, founded on an essentialist understanding of sex differences as inborn, occurs in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century women's writing and oratory on war and continues today in casual utterances. It is often, however, modified by a cultural variant that sees women as peace-prone due not to their biology but to their experience as nurturers in the social division of labor. Sara Ruddick, using the concepts of "maternal thinking" and "a rationality of care" evolved a persuasively nonessentialist and rationalist transformation of "mothering" (Ruddick 1989). However, many antiwar feminists continue to avoid invoking "motherhood" for peace, both because some mothers clearly support wars and because, symbolically crucial to

patriarchy, motherhood is all too easily co-opted by the nationalist and militarist state (Scheper-Hughes 1998).

“Sex equality” is a second trope woven through feminist peace activism, understandably invoked by the denigration of the feminine in militarized societies. It encounters contradiction, however, as women increasingly, in the name of feminism, seek equal status and opportunity in decision-making functions in government (including the conduct of international relations) and in national armed forces, where they have increasingly sought the right to serve in combat (Feinman 2000).

The most persistent and widespread interpretation of feminism in contemporary women’s antiwar movements, however, is a social constructionist and holistic one. Calling for a disassociation of men and masculinity from violence and war making, antimilitarist feminism must logically be predicated on the potential of gender relations to be transformed through cultural effort. It must also be holistic in acknowledging—because this is so apparent in war—the intersectionality of gender, class, and race at both individual and structural levels. Thus, it must be concerned with the profound sexism of war (Reardon 1986) that amplifies male power, valorizes stereotypical masculine qualities, and increases sexualized violence against women. At the same time, it cannot avoid being concerned with ending economic exploitation of one class or nation by another, and ending racism and ethnic “othering,” since all three processes are visibly connected, all bear heavily on women, and all are implicated in perpetuating war.

[See also [Feminism, Cultural Violence of](#); [Feminist Peace Theory](#); [Gender, Socialization, and Militarism](#); [Gender and Conflict](#); [Gender and Peace Cultures](#); [Gender and Violence](#); [Gender as a Category for Analysis of Conflict](#); [Gender Roles and Conflict Mediation](#); [Greenham Common Women’s Peace Camp](#); [Lysistrata](#); [Nonviolence, Feminist Views of](#); [Patriarchy and War](#); [Sexuality and Peace](#); United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325; [Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom](#); [Women’s Peace Camps](#); [Women’s Peace Movements, History of](#); [Women’s Peace Organizations](#); [Women’s Role in Peacemaking](#); and [Women Strike for Peace](#)]

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