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World disarmament? Start by disarming masculinity

CYNTHIA COCKBURN 30 April 2015

Massive world military spending is driven by the profit motive the arms industry and politicians' weaponized notion of 'security'. But women peace activists also hold militarized masculinity to account.

Unsurprisingly, world disarmament has featured prominently in the WILPF events in The Hague this week. It is, after all, the key goal in WILPF's long struggle with national governments and the international system since the Armistice of 11 November 1918. On WILPF's birthday, 28 April, we mounted a symbolic action outside the World Forum. Thousands of red plastic discs, symbolizing the world's $1776 billion global military expenditure, were piled in a heap. Women, with shovels and with their hands, scooped up the coins and transferred them to accounts of their choice - 'health', 'education' or 'human rights'.

In a symbolic public action, women take money out of the world's military budget....

… and put it to better use in health services, education, or human rights.

Another persistent theme in the Centenary Congress and Conference has been gender relations. One of the commitments in the Manifesto adopted by Congress is to 'transform gender from a power relation to one of partnership'. And the first plenary of the Conference addressed the male-dominant gender order as one of the 'root causes' of militarization and war. Speakers contributed 'critical perspectives on the construction of violent masculinities, patriarchy, and engaging men'.

On the face of it, the two preoccupations, one with gender relations and the other with global military spending, may seem to have little connection. The first speaks of the human, intimate, individual and personal; the other of the machinery of war, missiles and military commands. And indeed the mainstream peace movements, comprising both men and women, tend not make the mental leap that is needed to bring them into a common analytic frame. On the other hand, it's characteristic of the women's peace movements, such as the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, the international network of Women in Black against War, and hundreds of smaller, more local women's peace initiatives, that they do so. And the particular feature of gender relations they point to is the persistence male dominance, accompanied (and indeed achieved) by the insistent shaping of masculinity, the ideal, preferred, form of manhood, as mentally competitive and combative; psychologically ready to use coercion; and physically equipped to prevail through force.

Over a span of twenty years I've had the privilege to meet and work with such groups of feminist activists, in a dozen countries, many of them in the Global South. They are generating a more and more coherent narrative about the causes of war. One of the things I've learned from them is that war doesn't stand alone. It's helpful to see it as part of a *continuum of violence*. That continuum persists along a scale of force (fist to bomb), a scale of time (peacetime, prewar, wartime, postwar), a scale of place (bedroom, city, continent) and so on. As peace activists, they say, we have to look for the organizational, economic, social and psychological connections along the continuum and address it as a whole. One of the things they notice is that *gender* is a thread running through the continua in every direction. Men and women, masculinity and femininity, in relation to each other, feature throughout the spectrum of violence.

A good example of women activists who clarify and alert us to a precise link in the gendered continuum of violence is the remarkable project in Israel called Gun-Free Kitchen Tables. They protest against the death and wounding of women, wives and partners in everyday life by soldiers and police with weapons they take home with them. These activists point out, loud and clear, that militarism doesn't stay in the barracks. It comes in the front door, it hangs in the closet. On a more global level, the women's mobilization within IANSA, the International Action Network on Small Arms and Light Weapons, successfully pressed the United Nations, during negotiation of the Arms Trade Treaty, to acknowledge precisely what women such as those of Gun Free Kitchen Tables have been telling us - the significance of guns in women's lives and deaths.

Another example of continuum-thinking is Okinawan Women Act Against Military Violence (OWAAMV), who insist on the connection between the violence inherent in the massive weaponry of the US military whose bases weigh upon their islands and the frequent rape and abuse of individual women by individual soldiers. Suzuyo Takazato, one of its founders, spoke graphically to me of the connection between patriarchy and militarization, both experienced every day on her Okinawan islands as violent systems, inextricably linked.

Of course, the word patriarchy does have an old-fashioned ring to it. Many 'Westerners' like to suppose that, in 'the West', in the post-Enlightenment era, actual rule by the patriarchal head of family, faded away. But Carole Pateman in her memorable book, *The Sexual Contract*, has left no room for doubt that a different version of male dominance has been substituted for rule by the fathers in modern times: it is the rule of the brothers. And we are still searching for a word to designate this updated male supremacism. Fratriarchy, perhaps, or andrarchy, androcracy? Take your pick. Personally, I like 'phallocracy'. But 'patriarchy' seems to be hanging in there.

Seeing war from their close-in vantage point leads Suzuyo Takato and other feminist antimilitarists to identify three main causes. They don't necessarily put patriarchy first. They may rather stress, in the first place, *economic* factors such as control of exploitable resources, and of markets. These are often the immediate cause of war.

A second causal factor they often cite is *political*: lines drawn between self-defining groups, 'us' and 'others'. The nation state system involves multiple struggles over borders. Borders divide one rival state from another, but usually fail to align with the borders of ethnic, cultural and religious groups that sometimes fight each other – maybe for domination of the state, or simply for recognition and rights. Racism features in this cause of war, especially white supremacism.

So, the economic order, the nation state system - what then of the *sex-gender order*? The feminist analysis tends to represent patriarchy, not necessarily as an immediate, precipitating factor in war, but as a 'root' cause, something that predisposes societies to militarism and war fighting, that makes war always already likely.

In this sense, the feminist analysis of war is 'wholistic', it sees multiple causes of war working *together*. After all, they emerged together, historically. Gerder Lerner's book, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, which usefully takes us back to the Upper Neolithic. Gradually, from tribal and village society there emerged a property-owning class, a system of city states - eventually empires – and the patriarchal, patrilineal family. Only then were the first standing armies created, for the protection and extension of privilege. War is the child not of barbarism but of 'civilization'.

Of course these systems, dimensions, processes of power are inter-related – 'intersected' if you like. You see them working together in all the institutions around us: class, 'race' and gender power are present in a bank, in a government, in a religious structure, in a family even. Watching the evening news, as we relaxed from the Conference during the week of debate and discussion, we saw reports of rioting in Baltimore. How could we escape making the link between economic inequality, racial oppression and masculine violence, watching these events on American streets and in the prisons?

Those news reports were a reminder, besides, that patriarchy is not only a hierarchy situating men above women. It's a hierarchical ranking among and between men too. Sometimes feminists are made to feel that in challenging patriarchy we are 'blaming men'. Our analysis doesn't blame men. It blames a system that deforms men. Several men were present among us at the WILPF

events. Especially welcome were those who shared their experience as activists in organizations of men coming together to address male violence, such as Sonke Gender Justice, of South Africa, and the gender justice information network Engaging Men. Together we applied ourselves to devising strategies for disarming masculinity.

We are convinced, after all, as feminists, that gender identities and behaviours are socially shaped, that we don't have to shrug and say 'nothing can be done - it's all given in the genes'. But where, concretely, are the social programmes that set about transforming gender relations and rewriting the script of masculinity? They are few and far between. In the UK, for instance, where there is increasing concern over men's abuse of women and girls, the policy response is 'protection' of the victims. 'We must take more care of women and girls.' Policy makers don't look for the man behind the neutral word 'abuser', 'predator', 'offender'.They don't ask 'What is it with men?' They don't have a plan of action. Meantime, a *tsunami* of cultural products, video games such as *Advanced Warfare* and films like *American Sniper*, bombard men and boys with the idea that militarized men are desirable men.

Just a couple of weeks ago I was astonished and heartened by a report from Glasgow, a city that's been called the 'murder capital' of Europe. They have been running a project they describe as 'caring men into change'. The authorities instituted what they called a Violence Reduction Unit (VRU), and a Community Initiative to Reduce Violence (CIRV). They have been working intensively with groups of male offenders. And in a couple of years they seem to have had an extraordinary remarkable effect. They claim to have halved the number of violent offences in Glasgow, and reduced weapons possession by 85%.

These figures are scarcely credible. If they are accurate, there is no excuse for holding back. They imply that 'in a couple of years' we could halve the current world annual figure of 55,000 war fatalities, and cut the annual global military budget from $1700 billion to a mere $255 billion. 'Caring men into change' needs to happen in every community, and in every country – starting right now.

***Cynthia Cockburn is reporting from WILPF's** Centenary Conference **in the Hague on 'Women's Power to Stop War',　Read more articles from the conference in 50.50's series** Women's Power to Stop War.*

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