

# Editorial: Militarism, Conflict and Women's Activism

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*Feminist Africa 10* is dedicated to critical gender analysis of postcolonial Africa's most destructive scourge - militarism and violent conflict. The idea for this issue was generated in the context of a research workshop that brought scholars and activists from East, West and Southern Africa together to discuss the prevailing situation and develop an agenda for feminist action research on gender and militarism in Africa<sup>1</sup>. During our discussions we realised the pervasiveness of conflict in our collective experience, as well as how little work has been done to address the centrality of gender in Africa's history of violent conflict and military rule. We agreed on the importance of generating a strong feminist analysis of this collective history and experience, formulated a collaborative research agenda that would support strategising for transformation of the current conditions, and made plans to implement this. FA 10 marks our identification of militarism and anti-militarist activism as a key area for feminist strategy and study in the coming years.

The African continent pursued political independence more than half a century ago, seeking freedom to overcome colonial legacies of military pacification and iron-fisted colonial governments characterised by administrative tyranny, economic exploitation, socio-cultural repression, and all the dynamics that perpetrated underdevelopment and the extreme marginalisation of African women from mainstream public and economic life. When victory came, and political transitions to African rule came, the institutions of state bore the marks of a patriarchal and militaristic history. Independent states promoted an ethos of restorative masculinity, and political culture in the new nations expressed authoritarian and militarist legacies, ritualised in the national parades of the Head of State and 'his' armed forces, echoed in the national symbols - flags and anthems that invariably have military origins.

The global context into which Africa's new nations emerged did not do much to overcome these legacies. On the contrary, individual nations found

themselves variously enmeshed in Cold-War politics and the arms race, and embroiled in a series of deadly proxy wars. Sudan and Nigeria led the way in the ensuing three decades of *coup d'états*, civil conflicts and military government, often fuelled by global power struggles. Even the worst dictators and most brutal non-state militias attracted external military assistance and spent vast fortunes on armaments that were largely used on their own people. African armies made a habit of bursting out of the barracks to perpetrate atrocities, and seize control of the state and all its assets. By the mid-1970s more than half of Africa was under military rule, and between 1990 and 2005, no fewer than 23 nations were involved in conflict, with an average cost per year of US \$18 billion to African economies. Violent conflicts are currently estimated to cost the region somewhere in excess of US \$3 billion per annum and military spending has surged in the run-up to the various civil wars, conflicts and genocides that have taken place since the end of colonial rule. The vast majority of these conflicts were carried out within nations, with increasingly devastating impact on civilian populations and rising casualties among women and children.

Recent years have seen the heavily militarised US regime declare a new borderless war without end, under the paranoid spectre of the 'Global War on Terror'. This is having world-wide ramifications and escalating militarization. The effects include the proliferation of weapons and military bases, some direct military action, a number of well-orchestrated proxy-actions in Africa and other parts of the formerly colonized world, and a growing acceptance of violence as the way to resolve conflicts. As of 2007, this escalating militarization is costing a staggering US \$1339 billion worldwide – nearly US \$4 billion *per day* – with the US being the biggest spender, accounting for nearly half of that amount. African countries are spending nearly US \$17 billion a year, of which US \$10 billion are spent in sub-Saharan Africa (SIPRI, 2008).

Yet, we find surprisingly little feminist scholarship on militarism in Africa. Jacky Cock's (1991) book *Colonels and Cadres* was the first, followed by conference collections such as *The Aftermath: Women in Post-Conflict Transformation* (Turshen, Meintjes and Pillay, 2002). The mainstream of African scholarship on militarism has almost completely neglected to address gender, as typified by Hutchful and Bathily's weighty collection *The Military and Militarism in Africa* (CODESRIA, 1997), which does not contain a single contribution that attends to gender. In this issue, Cheryl Hendricks's exacting

review of the recent two-volume work edited by Nhema and Zeleza (2008) indicates that as far as mainstream African work goes, very little has changed in the ensuing decade, despite the growing public awareness of women's extensive activism and their involvement in all aspects of conflict, peace-building and post-conflict reconstruction work. It is thus a field that demands scholarly attention.

To approach this intensely challenging terrain, we frame our engagement in terms of the concept of militarism. This concept is based on our realisation that war and conflict are merely the explicit expressions of deeply gendered, as well as ethnicized and classed, long-term dynamics that precede the outbreak of conflict, escalate dramatically, and persist long after 'peace' has been officially declared and the transition from overt warfare is taking place. This approach echoes feminist theorisations of gender-based violence as the expression of unequal gender relations and dynamics that are far more pervasive than the specific instances of actual violence.

Theorising conflict from a gender perspective very quickly leads us to the realisation that for women living in patriarchal societies, all of which are characterised by a general proclivity for violence, peace and security are elusive, limited and precarious. Even in times of supposed peace, many women do not enjoy peace and security in their homes, workplaces or on the streets. Furthermore, there is much evidence that the more general, everyday violence that women are specifically subject to is especially commonplace in pre- and post-war situations. The experiences of women in Nigeria, Sudan, Ethiopia and Eritrea, Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sierra Leone, Liberia and many other post-conflict locations in and beyond Africa demonstrate that gender-based violence precedes wartimes and does not end when peace is declared. Indeed, the fact is that militarism in the broadest sense reifies polarised gender relations and gender identities, and particular notions of masculinity and masculine prowess seem to be bound up with gender-based violence, which threatens women's security.

Perhaps we should not be surprised by this, as the capacity to maintain a standing army, *in peace-time*, has been a defining feature of the state since its inception. Societies that did not (as was the case in many parts of Africa) were defined as 'stateless' or 'acephalous'. The establishment of an all-male army was an essential aspect of the 'civilizing' mission of colonisation to the production of masculinity among the natives. The colonial forces were then widely deployed in the service of imperial interests, but more

pertinently for this issue of FA, they were also used to pacify rebellions and insurrections, often across ethnic boundaries that were thus intensified. Recruitment and conscription, carried out in accord with the 'divide and rule' principle, targeted local men, removed them from their communities and social responsibilities and transformed them before those who survived Europe's bloodletting returned home. They returned to rebel, and sometimes to rule, in all the ways that have marked Africa's postcolonial experience with the culture of militarism.

This issue focuses on militarism because we identify militarisation, violent conflict, civil wars, military rule – and all the invidious and pervasive political, social, cultural and economic effects of military institutions, discourses and practices – as significant obstacles to Africa's progress towards democratisation, development, and gender justice. We regard militarism as the antithesis of revolutionary pan-African visions of Africa as a region freed from the destructive legacies of its patriarchal and colonial history. Violent conflicts, the crudest and most obvious manifestations of militarism, have wrought devastation and destruction across great swathes of the African continent, killing, maiming and scarring children, women and men, scoring communities with traumatising and debilitating effects that persist for generations: the shattering of lives, the scattering of families, the destruction of the physical environment, the disruption of political and cultural systems and the already fragile support systems that have enabled much of Africa to survive as long as it has. The contributions to this issue of *Feminist Africa* suggest that building just peace and genuine security demands that we join hands and collectively strategise to demilitarise the region, and that we set about working to develop cultures that transform the destructive legacies of militarism which still permeate our societies at so many levels.

Bringing a feminist lens to bear on the meaning of militarisation, conflict, peace and reconstruction, takes our analysis beyond 'toys for the boys' considerations of arms, arms expenditure, and the mobilisation and demobilisation of national armies. It enables us to tackle the broader historical and socio-cultural conditions that underpin the normalisation of institutionalised violence in our lives. Feminist analyses define militarism in terms that include values, norms and ideas, institutional cultures, and values that emanate from the military and military institutions to permeate society, and come into play in all aspects of culture and identity.

The contents of this issue of *Feminist Africa* set out to stimulate study

and analysis of the manifestations of militarism in Africa in this light. The contributors address a number of conflict, pre- and post-conflict contexts, paying attention to women's experiences, and highlighting the way that women have mobilised to survive, resist and challenge militarism in just a few of Africa's conflict-ridden zones.

Rangira Béa Gallimore provides us with a cultural-historical analysis of Rwandan militarism, focusing on the interconnectedness of class, ethnicity and gender in the gradual militarisation of the postcolonial Rwandan state. She offers an unsettling consideration of why rape, in this case, specifically the rape of women designated as Tutsi, was so widespread during the 1994 genocide.

Muthoni Wanyeki's standpoint considers the recent post-election violence in Kenya, thus providing a different iteration of the interconnection of ethnicity, class and gender in the genesis of collective violence – this time precipitated by the imperative of democratic elections in a purportedly peaceful nation, albeit one marked by a history of injustice and corruption.

Yaliwe Clarke's feature draws on various African examples to examine whether security sector reform offers an opportunity to challenge the pervasiveness of aggressive modes of masculinity that characterise the military institutions responsible for defining and maintaining security. She notes that even the peacekeeping forces sent to protect communities sometimes perpetrate sexual violence. Her analysis points towards a broader re-conceptualization of 'security' as no longer merely a matter of state, but inclusive of commitment to the real interests and wellbeing of the people, such that women and men can live as equals in a less violent world.

Helen Scanlon's contribution critically examines the transitional justice institutions that have emerged in selected countries, looking at the increasing attention to sexual violence, and the gender implications of this. Her analysis leads her to problematise the simplistic polarisation of perpetrators (assumed to be male) and victims (assumed to be women), and looks at how this plays out in demobilisation efforts which continue to exclude women, and still largely fail to prosecute rapists.

The inextricable links between militarism and economic globalisation – both deeply gendered processes – are brought to light in Sokari Ekine's discussion of women's responses to the conditions facing the people of the Niger Delta, where relationships between the militarised ruling elites and transnational corporations sustain extreme human rights abuses. Here the destruction of the physical environment is paramount, yet it is often a neglected consequence of

conflict and wars that can last for several generations.

In our standpoint section, we include the reflections of former Deputy Minister of Defence in South Africa, Nozizwe Madlala-Routledge, who looks back on her experience within that most male-dominated sector of government. Appointed during a time of transformation and tasked with bringing about change, her reflections allude to some of the lost opportunities that South Africa has come to signify for feminists and anti-militarism activists. A decade later and now out of the Parliament, for allegedly not “toeing the line” during her subsequent appointment as Deputy Minister of Health, Madlala-Routledge’s contribution calls for an international mobilisation against militarism.

From the distressing realities of conflict, the documented limitations of peace-brokering and institutions of transitional justice and security sector reform with regard to women, in the context of a US-led global escalation of militarization, we turn to highlight women’s responses and the emergence of feminist activism against militarism. Women all over the African region have not only participated in, survived and resisted violent conflict, but played key roles in facilitating negotiations and peace-brokering efforts, as is so beautifully documented in Abigail Disney and Gini Ritecker’s film *Pray the Devil Back to Hell* reviewed here by Yaba Badoe. Women’s ongoing practical work towards healing the deep harms wrought on women’s bodies and minds by sexual torture and abuse is typified by the work of Isis-WICCE in Uganda, discussed by Ruth Ochieng in conversation with FA. Our conversation with Yasmin Jusu-Sheriff shares experiences of the civil war in Sierra Leone, and the peace-building work of the Mano-River Women’s Peace Network (MARWOPNET) in facilitating reconciliation and justice across borders. In the spirit of international solidarity, we have included Gwyn Kirk’s profile of the US and Asia-Pacific based International Network of Women Against Militarism which reminds us of the need for feminist transnational strategies and alliances that can respond to the global character of militarism, and a review of *“If I Were Given the Choice”: Palestinian Women’s Stories of Daily Life during the Years 2000-2003 of the Second Intifada*, which chronicles the harrowing experiences of Palestinian women living under Israeli occupation.

The recent US attempt to establishing a US African High Command on the continent has alerted us to the reality of ongoing manoeuvres, and the continued building of six new bases in asset-rich and politically precarious African nations. While no African government has currently agreed to host AFRICOM, we remain concerned that while the appointed African-American

Commander General Kip Ward waits it out in Germany, some of our leaders are definitely still interested in attracting the perceived financial and strategic benefits that would accrue from hosting such a force. Perhaps not surprisingly, this is most clearly expressed by the new government of Liberia, which not only has the closest of ties with the US, but has also seen one of the most gruesome conflicts in the region. So while we welcome having the first African woman President in modern history, we need to also note that we have a responsibility to see that she – and all Africa’s other Presidents for that matter – are kept fully aware of the popular and continent-wide resistance to this extension of the US military presence in Africa.

This issue of *Feminist Africa* in many ways presents a grim picture of the conditions facing people, particularly women, of Africa, and the challenges that face women’s activism. However true this may be, the varied and creative forms of women’s growing engagement in protesting militarism and violence evidenced by the peace networks and movements that have emerged in recent times must also inspire us. It is in keeping with this that the features presented here exemplify a combination of emerging scholarship, rather than a profile of established expertise in the field. As such, they do well in highlighting the possibilities for further research and critical analysis of militarism and war from African-located feminist perspectives. The activism appears to be much more advanced than the research literature at this stage. We hope FA 10 will inspire our readers to take up the challenge of bringing feminist scholarship and activism together in new efforts to resist and redress the local and global dynamics of militarism and make the 21<sup>st</sup> century less violent than the 20<sup>th</sup> century proved to be.

## References

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## Endnotes

- 1 Held 2-4<sup>th</sup> October 2007 in Cape Town. We are indebted to all those who participated in the discussions that took place at that meeting (AGI 2007 unpublished 'Gender, Militarism, Conflict, Resistance and Peace Building' Report of the Gender and Militarism Working Meeting, Cape Town 2-4<sup>th</sup> October 2007).