

We Need an International Campaign to Resist Androcentric Militarized Neo-Colonial Masculinities!

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"It is in the interest of patriarchy not to reject the legitimization of state violence as much as it is to avoid gender equality. Its exclusive claim to the lawful use of lethal force maintained the patriarchal state and limits the potential challenges to its power raised by rivals and dissidents, including the challenges of democracy, and especially of women's equality." -Betty Reardon

Women have increasingly been incorporated into armed forces worldwide, both in conventional and guerilla armies. For many years however, the roles of women in war and other types of violent conflict remained almost invisible throughout the world. Accounts of war tended to cast men as protectors and doers while women were portrayed as the passive, innocent victims. As women's experiences have become more broadly known, it has become clear that there are many different ways in which women live through and participate in wars: as fighters, community leaders, social organizers, workers, farmers, traders, welfare workers, among other roles. Nonetheless, many conflict narratives highlight a common theme of women seeking to minimize the effects of violence through their different social roles. The bravery of those women who go against the general tide of opinion, and sometimes literally place themselves in the line of fire, has come to be much celebrated.

Feminist scholars have begun to analyze the intersection of militarism and patriarchy and the impact they have on gender roles. They are discovering that merely becoming involved in a military force does not automatically liberate women from exploitative relationships. Rather, women who choose to join military forces have to combat both the external enemy and the patriarchal attitudes and actions within the military force itself. Whereas it was believed that the incorporation of women into the military would transform gender relations and roles and free women from patriarchy, the reality is

that militarism serves to reinforce and reproduce unequal gender relations. Although we have produced some powerful new identities for women, and military forces internationally are enlisting more women, military organizations remain distinctly patriarchal institutions by maintaining a sexual division of labour, with most women soldiers occupying sub-ordinate positions resembling stereotypical female roles in the civilian sector.

Understanding war involves understanding militarism and how it shapes military forces as social institutions. Military forces are not gender neutral. Together the ideology of militarism and the military organizations they produce, interact, mobilize and construct gender identities in ways that promote patriarchal ideology and practices. Understanding the intersection of militarism and gender is central to the achievement of sustainable and positive peace. Contemporary accounts of women's involvement in wars show that women play both 'peace making' and 'war-mongering' roles. Studies of war highlight women's direct involvement in violence, as well as in motivating the men in their communities to fight. This is particularly so where wars are about national identities, as women in most societies take the major responsibility for passing on values and cultural identities to children, and thus play active roles in supporting exclusive and aggressive ideologies about nationalism. We also know very well that women can and do commit acts of violence.

However, the extent of women's involvement in violent acts in warfare remains poorly understood, and violence is still commonly believed to be the preserve of men. The role of women in militarization – the proliferation of weapons and military force – has been largely obscured and mystified by two competing perspectives – those of sexism and feminism. Both sexist and feminist analyses exclude women from war on the grounds that they are bearers of 'special qualities'. Sexism excludes women from the ranks of the military on grounds of their physical inferiority and unsuitability for fighting. Women are constructed as the 'weaker sex', to be 'protected' and 'defended' by strong men. There is an essentialist feminist discourse that similarly excludes women, but on opposite grounds – that of their supposedly innate nurturing qualities, and their pacifism. The outcome of these perspectives is that war is understood as an exclusively male affair, and the military as a masculine institution – the last bastion of male power – from which women are excluded and by whom women are often victimized.

The dawn of democracy and the end of the violent system of Apartheid in South Africa presented new opportunities for South Africans to re-think the

issue of security. The democratically elected government led by the African National Congress (ANC) began a process of transforming all the country's institutions, as part of the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP). This process, based on the new Constitution, established a broader perspective on security, which went beyond state security to include the security of people, broadly known as human security. The new government has adopted a policy that allows women to serve in the military in all aspects and at levels of defence, including combat.

Subsequent to the adoption of this policy, the number of women in the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) has increased dramatically to around 20%. Most of South Africa's military women have come from the non-statutory former liberation armies, the ANC's Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) and the PAC's Azanian People's Liberation Army (APLA). However, this influx of women seems to have done little to change the male domination of the SANDF, as few women have risen to the higher levels of command. Currently only one Rear Admiral in the Navy and a few Brigadiers and Major Generals in the Army, the Air Force and the South African Military Health Service, are women.

Analyzing the role of women in conventional and guerrilla armies of the South African Defence Force (SADF) and Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), Cock (1991) says although in both the SADF and MK in the period between 1976 and 1990, the numbers of women had increased significantly, in both armies however, women were under-represented in positions of leadership and authority. In addition, militarized notions of masculinity where the presumption that a man is unproven in his manhood until he has engaged in collective, violent physical struggle against someone categorized as the enemy, have increased social violence, particularly violence against women and children.

Looking back, I see my appointment as the South African Deputy Defence Minister in 1999 within the context of the political transformation that was taking place. This saw women being actively encouraged to enter previously male-dominated environments. This transformation drive was inspired by the spirit of the new Constitution, as well as by the commonly held view that South Africa faced no immediate external military threats, and was unlikely to do so in the foreseeable future. In contrast to the secrecy of the past, this brought with it a new culture of relative openness about defence matters. For the new government, the national defence force needed to change to reflect the demography and values of the democratic state. The integration process and the subsequent rationalization and reduction of the Defence Forces were

primary tasks.

My appointment was a surprise to me and many of my friends and colleagues as although I had been active in the liberation struggle and the underground structures of the African National Congress, I had not served in any military capacity. Furthermore I was known to be a Quaker, and hence a pacifist.

The militarization of Africa through the arms trade in particular, coupled with poverty and other inequities, plays a major role in promoting and prolonging conflicts, increasing their intensity and destructiveness, and making them more intractable and the issues they raise harder to solve. With this in mind, I joined those who opposed to the purchase of new weapons by the South African National Defence Force. We argued that South Africa did not face any external enemies and therefore did not need to procure new conventional weapons. However, the biggest controversy has been over the allegation of bribes of senior government officials in the Arms Deal. Although these allegations had not come to light at the time of my appointment to the Ministry of Defence, I do now ask myself if I should not have done more to press for answers on both the offsets that had been promised as part of the deal, and regarding the allegations that have since come to light. The fact of the matter is that most military business is conducted in conditions of secrecy. The deeper question is this: how much can be done to transform the institution, given that the culture of secrecy remains so dominant in the military? How compatible is such a culture with democracy and public accountability?

My appointment drew much media and public attention. One news report said the appointment was 'either a monumental guffaw or stroke of genius', while another said 'having a Quaker in the Ministry of Defence was 'like putting a vegetarian in a butcher shop'. As a feminist, I had argued that the incorporation of women into the Defence Force would have the negative effect of changing the women and not the military institution and culture, in which they would be present only in small numbers or would not be in positions of control and power.

Militaristic notions of masculinity serve as a powerful tool for making men into soldiers because military forces encourage masculine identities based on aggressiveness, competitiveness, the censure of emotional expression and images of weak soldiers as effeminate. Women need the 'critical mass' in such male dominated institutions in order to be able to make a significant change in such institutions.

As an exercise, I once asked one of the generals who had integrated from

MK, what the reaction had been to my appointment. The answer I received was that the military did not mind at all that I was a Quaker, but they certainly did mind that I was a woman. My guess is that the military men felt quite confident that they could make me change my mind about being a pacifist. They argued that ‘in order to achieve peace, you have to prepare for war’. On the other hand, they could not change the fact that I was a woman, and it bothered them much more that they now had to take orders from a woman.

As Deputy Minister, my responsibilities included the transformation of the Defence Force. This primarily involved overseeing the integration process which brought together statutory and non-statutory forces – those from the conventional defence force and those from the guerrilla liberation army. I broadened the definition to mean transforming the military culture as well. This did not go down very well with the established order which valued what they termed a universal military culture that could not be changed. Yet, the people of South Africa, through the new Constitution, adopted a new approach to Defence attuned to democratic principles that required all institutions to fall under civil oversight, and to contribute to the national imperative of reconstructing our country. Under the new order, South Africans wanted schools, bridges and houses to be built, and they argued that the military had the resources and the duty to contribute to the Reconstruction and Development Programme.

As part of the transformation process, I facilitated an annual gathering that brought together women soldiers with peace activists and academics to look at peace through a gender lens. We called this forum the African Women’s Peace Table. Its purpose was to provide a space for analyzing conflicts and to provide a gender perspective to the interventions for ending the conflicts and for the post-conflict reconstruction. The African Women’s Peace Table conducted a critique of the approach of the Beijing Platform for Action to women and conflict, which characterized women in conflict situations only as victims and refugees, rather than as active participants both in conflicts and in the resolution of the conflicts.

Another aspect of transformation I introduced was a different approach to peacekeeping, to ensure that it included a strong element of development. Called Developmental Peacekeeping, the doctrine is premised on the fact that most wars in Africa result from competition for resources and the solution must therefore be developmental. Thus, when peacekeepers are deployed, they should in addition, carry shovels and picks in order to begin reconstructing

the country as they keep warring factions apart. Rolling peacekeeping and post conflict reconstruction into one process is an essential component towards achieving sustainable peace. Related to this was the need to ensure a code of conduct for the peacekeepers, one which protects women's human rights. Reports of sexual exploitation of women by peacekeepers are rife and strong measures are needed to ensure that those who exploit women they are supposed to protect are dealt with accordingly.

When women fight in wars, we are compelled to examine the complexities and interrelationships of gender and war. Indeed, merely becoming involved in a military force does not automatically liberate women from unequal and exploitative gender relationships.

As feminists, it is in our interest to explore the use of non-violence in dealing with conflict and efforts towards social change. Budding research shows that feminist consciousness will assist African men resist androcentric militarized neo-colonial masculinities. We need to strengthen the voices of women in policy development and implementation requires that we act together across borders to develop feminist leadership that truly understands and appreciates the importance of examining all our policies and programmes from a gender perspective. Our future as a continent depends on this co-operation, bringing together feminist researchers, activists and women's organizations in building a strong and effective women's movement.