

## **Women, men and nuclear weapons**

### **Cynthia Cockburn**

On Monday 15 February, at the Big Blockade of the Atomic Weapons Establishment in Aldermaston, Berkshire, one of the seven gates was blockaded by uniquely by women. A planning group of around ten women had got together to organize the 'women's gate'. They were members of the Aldermaston Women's Peace Campaign, the London group of Women in Black against War, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, the electronic network Women against NATO, the London Feminist Network, and other groups.

Why a women's gate? There is a long tradition of women organizing against the Bomb. On the 1 March 1954 the United States tested a nuclear weapon on Bikini Atoll in the Pacific Ocean. Japanese fishermen in their boat *The Lucky Dragon*, were caught in the radioactive fallout. The incident caused a wave of anti-nuclear activism in Japan. It began in Sugunami, an electoral district of Tokyo. And it was mainly the women of Sugunami neighbourhood who organized a petition for the ban on nuclear weapons that raised just short of 30 million signatures in two months.

Those French and US atmospheric nuclear tests also sparked off another response, at the opposite end of the Pacific Ocean: the movement for a Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific. An important part of that was WNFIP - Women for a Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific. One reason women organized was because so many of the children to which they gave birth after they were irradiated by the nuclear tests had terrible birth defects.

Later, in the 1980s, there was a huge movement of women in the UK against the introduction here of US cruise and Pershing nuclear missiles. British peace movement readers will hardly need reminding - it centred on the RAF base at Greenham Common, where a substantial arsenal of nuclear missiles was to be stationed. One day a group of women set out from Cardiff in Wales and walked a hundred miles to Greenham. When they arrived, on 5 September 1981, four of them chained themselves to the fence and demanded a televised debate with the Secretary of State for Defence. This was the start of a spontaneous women's peace camp that soon had more than a hundred women living under plastic and canvas, and thousands more coming at weekends from Greenham support groups that sprang up around the country. On 12 December 1982 an estimated 30,000 women came to protest at Greenham Common, enough to completely 'embrace the base' around its 14 kilometre fence. The camp persisted till after the last missile had been returned to the USA in 1991.

Greenham was a place where women made links with each other worldwide around the nuclear issue. One of the women who came to Greenham from Australia was Zohl de Ishtar, who had helped organize, and has since written books about, *Women for a Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific*. The women resisting the arrival in Britain of cruise missiles were in touch with others organizing against the same weapon at Comiso in Sicily, Pine Gap in Australia and Seneca Falls, New York.

Women who camped at Greenham went on to contribute hugely to anti-nuclear work elsewhere. To name just three: Helen John founded another a women's peace camp in 1993 at the missile-warning station at Menwith Hill; Rebecca Johnson (who was 'gate support' person at the women's gate on 15 February) set up the Acronym Institute for Disarmament Diplomacy and travels continuously worldwide as a respected specialist in nuclear weapons control. She was one of the founders of the Aldermaston Women's Peace Camp in 1985. And Sian Jones, who later helped mobilize the Aldermaston Women's Peace Campaign, has been tracking and publicizing developments at the Atomic Weapons Establishment for almost two decades.

What is it that brings women out *as women* against nuclear weapons, or against war, or against militarism itself? My work is research. For twelve years now I have been researching feminist antiwar organizing. In the course of fact-finding in a score of countries I have found that women usually have three reasons for organizing separately as women. The first is that women have an experience of militarism and war that is specific to their gender. Birthing babies with birth defects, as did the Pacific women, is just one of these experiences. Rape of women on an epidemic scale, as in the Bosnian war and in the Congo and Sudan now – that is another. Then again, women often feel special anger about military expenditure because it reduces the budget available for the public and social services on which so many women, who do the majority of domestic, health and care work, paid and unpaid, specially depend. Women organize as women to make women's particular experience in peace and war visible and understood.

The second reason behind 'women-only' antiwar activism is simply for effectiveness, for women to be able to exercise choice. Often in mixed groups it is men who take a lead. They may not mean to dominate, but somehow their voices carry more weight. It is not the case in all groups. There are some in the peace movement that are very careful in the way they conduct gender relations. But some women in the not-so-wonderful groups sometimes get to think, they have told me, 'I can't waste my time with this "double militancy" - having to struggle *in* the group in

order to struggle *out there* in the world. Let's do it on our own.' That makes women's voices more audible, and women can make choices, choose styles and strategies of organization and action, that feel comfortable to them as women, and are different from those of some mixed groups.

So – first, getting women's experience visible; second, doing things in a particular way. But there is a third reason some women choose to organize as women, and it may be more significant than the other two. It is because there is a feminist analysis of militarism and war that is lacking in the thinking of the mainstream movement.

Militarism and war are products of systems of power. The main two war-sustaining systems are (1) capitalism – the class power of money and property; and (2) nationalism – the racist power of the state, white rule, ethnic hatred. Both are systems of oppression and exploitation and are thus essentially, necessarily, violent. The antiwar movement mobilizes against both those systems of power. Feminists say, 'Hold on...there's another system of power intertwined with those two. It too is oppressive, exploitative and violent. It too predisposes society to militarism and war. It's called patriarchy". What feminists mean by patriarchy is the millennia-old, world-wide, almost universal form of gender order in which men exercise power over women, and which fosters a kind of masculinity that thrives on domination and force.

So, some women say, the antiwar movement needs to address, yes, capitalist exploitation, and, yes, racist, nationalist impulses, but *also* systemic male power. All three, nothing less. Struggle for a transformation of gender relations has to be recognized as peace work. In our very own antiwar, antimilitarist and peace movements, just as we try not to behave like little capitalists, and just as we do not tolerate racism, so we should not tolerate sexism. Our activism has to reflect the world we want to create. Totally. Prefigurative struggle, it's called. *Coherencia entre fines y medios*.

I want to end by stressing that we are not talking here about men and women as such, let alone about individual men and women. We are talking about cultures - cultures that thrive and multiply everywhere from bank boardrooms, to the pub on a Saturday night, from TV commercials to computer games, cultures that set up masculinity and femininity as caricatures of human 'being', that create a whole symbolic system in which particular qualities are ascribed to masculinity, and given supremacy. What is a 'real man'? Being authoritative, combative, defended, controlling, hard, always ready to use violence to defend honour. It is clear that these qualities are deeply implicated in militarism and war. And women make a connection

here: actual men *either* find the courage to refuse this model *or* they act it out. And when they act it out, they do so not only in the military, but also in everyday life, in ways that are very costly to women. So women can hardly avoid seeing violence as a continuum, one that stretches from the school playground, bedroom and back street to the battlefield, from their own bodies to the body politic. It may be that our movement is something more than an antiwar movement, more even than a peace movement. It may be a movement for a nonviolent world.

To come back to nuclear weapons...One day in the summer of 2005, two women came to Stockholm to address a meeting of the prestigious Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission. It was chaired by Hans Blix. He had invited them to speak on 'the relevance of gender for eliminating weapons of mass destruction'. This whole idea was no doubt surprising to most members of the Commission. But these women were well respected. Carol Cohn was Director of the Boston Consortium on Gender, Security and Human Rights and a senior scholar at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. Felicity Hill was Greenpeace international political adviser on nuclear and disarmament issues, and had been a security adviser at UNIFEM and director of the WILPF office in New York. They received a careful hearing. And they spoke about how ideas about gender – what is deemed masculine or feminine, powerful or impotent, affect our efforts towards halting the proliferation of WMD. They drew on detailed research. For instance, insider research that revealed the laddish, boys'-own, culture of a certain nuclear policy institute. Research that had analysed and revealed how the fear of being seen as 'soft' or 'wimpish' had influenced actual political decisions to go to war in recent times. They also cited research that shows the tight link between masculine identity, men's sense of self, and the ownership of a gun (or a knife or a pit-bull terrier). The man-gun affinity is something that has been found in many countries to hinder demobilization after war. The two women told the Commissioners:

There's now general recognition that there are significant gender dimensions to the possession of small arms and light weapons. It would be naïve to assume that this association suddenly becomes meaningless when we're talking about larger, more massively destructive weapons. And it's more naïve still to think it doesn't matter.

So, at the Women's Gate during the Big Blockade of the AWE nuclear weapons factory on 15 February 2010 women were holding banners and placards with messages similar to those I have heard spoken by Suzuyo Takazato in Japan, by Kim Sook-Im in Korea and Stasa Zajovic in Serbia. They might have been written by women in countries as far apart as Colombia and Spain, India and the

Philippines. They said: 'Spend money on services not nuclear weapons', 'Security for women? Disarm masculinity. Disarm militaries', and 'No fists, no knives, no guns, no bombs - no to all violence'.