

## Talk for WILPF AGM - March 20, 2010

By Cynthia Cockburn

### Militarism, Masculinity and Men

“Militarism, masculinity and men” is rather a tough subject to talk about and probably a tough subject to listen to as well.... probably there are a lot of different thoughts about it in this audience. I’ve been a member of WILPF for some years now, and I believe our membership is quite mixed. My hunch is that women don’t join WILPF all for the same reasons or with the same mindset about peace and war. Some of us probably join in order to simply strengthen the peace movement as a whole by mobilizing women - women as a category of citizens – to encourage women to be active and make their voice heard on all peace issues. In other words, by setting up a women’s organization, we hope we can add women’s numbers and energy to the movement as a whole. And that’s a good enough reason.

Then there are others of us who’ve chosen to join WILPF because we’re particularly touched by the fate of women in war. We want to be in an organization that can react to women’s experience as victims and survivors in countries affected by war and militarization. Congo for instance. Or Afghanistan. We value WILPF as a vehicle for getting those women’s voices heard and their suffering recognized. But also to get women’s strengths valued – to assert what women can contribute to peacemaking. In this sense, obtaining and responding to Resolution 1325 has fitted well into WILPF’s role.

I certainly count myself in both those types of WILPF member. But there’s a third reason some of us join a women’s antiwar organization – and it’s usually as well as, not instead of, the other two I mentioned. We join a women’s antiwar organization because we have a gender theory of war. We’re learning from feminist antimilitarists, feminist peace activists, around the world who’ve been developing a rather fresh understanding of militarism and war, that adds something to the way the mainstream peace movement sees it.

Women are saying, yes, right, capitalism is a cause of war – neoliberal global capitalism and corporate power. And yes, nationalism, too - the system of exclusion and inclusion, ethnic hatreds, white supremacy – that cluster of things is a cause of war. Serbs killing Muslims, Hutus killing Tutsis. On those things we agree.

BUT, they're also saying – and I've heard them say it in a lot of different countries, most recently in South Korea and Japan where I was last year – you have to see patriarchy as one of the causes of war. That's a clumsy old word, but I hear a lot of women using it still, for lack of an alternative. Patriarchy - the gender order in which we live, the system through which men gain massively by subordinating women. It may not be a cause in the very same way as capitalist's greed for oil, or nationalist's hatred of Christians, Jews or Muslims, is a cause. But patriarchy – including but not only the way men and masculinity are shaped in patriarchy, predisposes our societies to sustain militarization, to make war seem natural and thinkable.

It's that gender 'take' on violence and war that's brought some of us into WILPF and women's peace activism. I have absolutely no clue as to what proportion of WILPF members are in this women's organization for this third reason. But in this talk I'm going to assume some of us here are. We're here because we want a space in which we don't have to fight all the time to assert the relevance of gender. We want a space in which we can clarify it, and go into more detail, understand it more deeply, and work out strategies for peace that take account of it.

Now, I think WILPF does supremely well at acting on the first two reasons I mentioned for having a women-only organization. But I actually think we don't campaign very much around the third. If I'm right about that – we can go on to ask: Why not? Why don't we speak out more clearly and more often on our hunch that patriarchal gender power relations, especially men and masculine cultures, are implicated in militarism, militarization and war?

I think it's because to say it makes us feel uncomfortable. First, it sounds as though we're being anti-man. Let's deal with that discomfort right away by thinking about men, men in our lives, men in our movement. I want to invite you to think of the men you know who are considerate and mild, respectful of women, and committed to nonviolence and the peace movement. Think for a moment. You may be able to think of one, or three, or quite a few. They might include a son, or a partner. Think of these real people, be glad of them, and keep them in mind while I'm talking. I'll be coming back to them at the end.

Second, it makes us uncomfortable because it sounds as though we think women have clean hands, that we're innocent of militarism and war. It isn't so. We aren't saying it is. Patriarchy survives and functions because women on the whole accept its values and play into men's power. With rare exceptions we've done so throughout history. We do so today. We have a new generation of girls right now who see girl power as residing in their ability to please men. Witness the fad of pole-dancing and

breast enlargement. If in doubt read Natasha Walters' book "Living Dolls". Women are not nearly so violent as men – only 5% of violent crime in the UK is by women. But we mostly rear our daughters and sons to play their part in a male power system.

I'll give you a little anecdote here to keep in mind. I saw a news clip in *The Guardian* one day in 2008. By then, there'd been quite some progress in nurseries and play groups where carers and parents, determined that they wouldn't any longer encourage violent play in their children, had voluntarily thrown plastic guns and pistols out of the toy box. This article stated that our government ministry, the Department for Children, Schools and Families (and the Children's Minister was a woman, Beverley Hughes) had now issued advice that boys should be *encouraged* to play with toy guns at nursery school. Why? It had been observed that boys between three and five years old were falling behind their female classmates in all areas of learning. The Ministry believed, Beverley Hughes said, that this was partly because nursery staff had been trying to curb boys' desire for boisterous games involving weapons. Boys were more likely to become interested in education and would no longer lag behind girls in achievement, it was felt, if encouraged to pursue their chosen play. There was a woman, playing into patriarchy.

So to make progress in convincing sceptics of the validity of a gender theory of war, we have to somehow find a way of talking about femininity and masculinity that distances them a little bit from actual women and men. We need to visualize gender not as an individual attribute of you, me or him, something we're born with, but as a set of forces, values, expectations, incentives and punishments, that as individuals we have to negotiate with, we have to deal with, struggle with, as we become who we become, as we find our identities.

However ... the relationship between what actual individual people do and experience, and the gender relations they are caught up in, is very slippery. We do have to start with the brute fact that there IS actually a difference in the positioning of actual women and actual men in relation to power, to violence and war. Statistically. It's not a one-hundred-percent cast iron difference – all men in one category, all women in another. But it's pretty striking. To illustrate this I'm going to do a little exercise. Again I'm going to take the *Guardian* newspaper – it's the edition for Wednesday March 10 – it happens to be the day I was writing this talk – and I'm going to tell you about some articles that I found in it. Just a few that can tell us something about gender in relation to power, violence and war. But I'm going to reverse the gender roles in the stories, to see how it feels.

OK – here's an article that shows us something about the gender of power and sexual violence. The Pope – supreme head of the Catholic Church. We know she's a woman, right – Pope Benedicta XV1. This news item is about apologies by Catholic priest(esses) for beatings and sexual abuse of girl pupils at Catholic seminaries and boarding school over several decades.

There was another news item that day about sexual violence. A 17 year old boy said to be of low self-esteem was found murdered. He was groomed on the Internet by an older woman representing herself as an attractive young girl. She persuaded the gullible young lad to meet her. She picked him up at the agreed meeting place. He was surprised to see this old person. But the woman said she would drive him to meet her daughter. She then raped and murdered the boy.

An article here about the gender of wealth. In the banking crisis, criminally risk-taking banks collapsed and were bailed out by governments. Now the delinquent bank executives, almost all of them women, are receiving cash bonuses worth scores of millions of pounds. Imagine it! Greedy women! Oh and another story here about an important member of the House of Lords, I mean the House of Ladies, Ashcroft is her name. She bankrolls the Conservative party from massive offshore wealth in her Caribbean businesses. Scandal – she's evading UK tax.

An article about gender and political representation. Women's almost total control of political power in India is about to be challenged at last. Men's representation in the upper and lower houses of the Indian parliament has never exceeded 10%. Women are 90% plus of the elected representatives. Now the Indian government is going to pass a law that will require men to be better represented: they'll have a quota of 30%.

And the front page feature, this tells us a lot about the gender of military power. It's about Mrs. Karzai, you know her, President of Afghanistan. She's in consultation with Jennifer Armitage, the supreme commander of NATO forces there. They're discussing ways of making peace with those ferocious fundamentalist insurgent women - the Talibana. Can Mrs. Karzai negotiate a peace between the Talibana and her allies in the Afghan government, the Northern War-ladies?

And a very sad story overpage. The first and only MALE British soldier to be killed in Afghanistan against 275 wome whose bodies have been flow home to grieving men in Wootton Bassett.

OK, it's just a trick – a device to make us think. The exercise shows us I think that the sexual division of power, violence and war is truly very striking. On the other hand, it's never complete, it's never 100%. There was after all that one soldier killed in Afghanistan – I pretended it was a man. Stepping out of our role reversal fantasy we see of course that she was a woman, Sarah Bryant, victim of a roadside bomb. The overwhelming majority of the soldiers killed in Afghanistan have been men. Men pay a heavy price for being the militarized sex. But increasingly there are women like this who volunteer for a military career.

So it's here that we need to make a second point. The exceptions to the gender rule, such as woman soldiers, do not disprove the rule of gender. The position of the gender minority, the exceptions, is not the same as that of the majority, who are the norm – it remains gender-specific. For instance, we know both from autobiographies and research that women soldiers have difficulty getting promotion, and that they are frequently harassed and raped by their male colleagues and senior officers. To be a woman soldier is not the same as to be a man soldier and it is not perceived as being the same.

More important for purposes of this talk today is that men who choose not to do 'standard issue' masculinity cannot slip unpunished into role reversal. A man who refuses to fight is not seen the same way as a woman who chooses not to join the army.

Because - what we're talking about here is not a bunch of individual men and women in neutral environments. We're looking at fiercely gendered cultures. The overall gender order of the world we live in is made up of organizations and institutions each of which has its gender regime – and all but a few of them are male dominant. For every little WILPF, with its women's membership, women leadership and women's culture, there are a million banks, churches, corporations, academies and military structures that (though they may have a lot of women in them) are part of a male-dominant system, permeated with cultures that encourage gender divisions, inequalities, stereotypes... and violence.

From a young age boys learn their bodies are weapons – fists, boots, eventually the penis, are instruments through which to impose their will. Military systems train and discipline and exploit that propensity for violence in boys and men.

“Men predominate across the spectrum of violence.” That's a quote. I'm going to take a short cut here and summon up the person who wrote that, and has said things about militarism and masculinity much better than I can - and who is probably

already well known to a lot of you.... An Australian academic called R.W.Connell. There are a number of books and a zillion articles published under that name on the theme of masculinity. But there's a specially good reason for reading them carefully. After a long life with a woman partner, and the daughter they raised together, Bob Connell has undergone a gender change and is now Raewyn Connell. Here's a person that's had a lifelong struggle at first hand with the tyrannies of gender.

I'm going to draw on a short article R.W.Connell wrote for a book Dubravka Zarkov and I published a few years ago on militarism and masculinity. The article was titled "Masculinities, the reduction of violence and the pursuit of peace", so it's very relevant to this afternoon's theme. He... (I'm going to refer to Raewyn as he because she was 'he' when this was written)...He singled out seven facts about masculinity that he saw as having implications for peace strategy, peace education. They may be helpful to us.

First, it's better to think in terms not of masculinity but masculinities, I the plural. Different forms of masculinity co-exist in any given culture, he pointed out. They differ between cultures, and they change over time. Violent, aggressive masculinity is not usually the only form of masculinity present in any given cultural setting. Identifying the alternatives, Connell says, can be a valuable resource for peace education.

Second – different masculinities exist in definite relations with each other, often relations of hierarchy and exclusion. One is generally dominant. Connell calls it the 'hegemonic' form of masculinity, the focal point of the local system of gender power. It might be the masculinity of a class elite, or an ethnic leadership, or the business world. In a country under military rule it's likely to be that of the military. But knowing that there may be subversive, discredited and despised masculinities, if you look for them – that too is a resource for the peace movement.

Third, masculinities are collective – they're shaped in institutions. The institutionalization of masculinity is a major problem for peace strategy. Corporations, armed forces, workplaces, voluntary organizations and the state are important sites of action. We have to struggle, Connell says, not just to change individuals, but to change the masculinist gender regime inside institutions.

Fourth, he reminds us that whether we're women or men, our bodies are arenas for gender – whether femininity or masculinity. Men's enactment of masculine gender constantly involves bodily pleasure, pain and vulnerability. Peace education

shouldn't be too much in the head, he says. We need to live and feel nonviolence in our bodies too.

Fifth...Masculinities come into existence as people act. They're always emerging and capable of changing direction. This is good because it means the process can be interrupted. No pattern of masculine violence is fixed, beyond all hope of social reform, he says. But equally no reform is final (as we just saw in the case of toy guns in the nursery).

Sixth – Masculinity may be a source of division and tension for a man and groups of men. Therefore, he says 'any group of men is likely to have complex and conflicting interests'. One or another we may be able to use to support change towards more peaceable gender patterns.

And finally, dynamics. History is continually changing our circumstances. Contradictions exist in gender relations and in the interplay of gender with – say – race and class. Controversy and conflict emerge and can be exploited for change towards peace and nonviolence.

So – winding up this article, Connell writes

“There are many causes of violence, including dispossession, poverty, greed, nationalism, racism and other forms of inequality, bigotry and desire. Gender dynamics are by no means the whole story. Yet given the concentration of weapons and the practices of violence among men, gender patterns appear to be strategic. Masculinities are the forms in which many dynamics of violence take shape. Evidently, then, a strategy for demilitarization and peace must include a strategy of change in masculinities. This is the new dimension in peace work which studies of men suggest: contesting the hegemony of masculinities which emphasize violence, confrontation and domination, and replacing them with patterns of masculinity more open to negotiation, cooperation and equality.”

So to come back to our very own peace movement in the here and now....

There are a lot of ideologies and philosophies in it. We're socialists of different hues, anarchists, liberals, pacifists (both principled and pragmatic). Some of us are secular, others of us belong to a range of faith groups and those faiths shape our antiwar stance too. And some of us are feminists. Most of us are several of these things at once.

In our campaigning, as a country-wide movement, as local groups, we try to express our particular 'take' on war, whatever it is. So socialist types, and many others too, who may not exactly define themselves as socialist but rather as anticapitalist, will speak out against the corporations that foment and profit from war. Sometimes on our placards and in our leaflets the USA (and the British government seen as an uncritical ally, or poodle, of the USA) are made surrogates for capitalism and imperialism. But as anticapitalists we don't hesitate to speak out.

Then again – those of us who bring a strong antiracism to our antiwar activism won't hesitate to speak out against bigotry and white supremacy – at the idea for instance that the West counts brown and black people's lives, or Israel counts Palestinian lives, as cheap, as of lesser value, and so thinks nothing of launching a violent onslaught against such populations. Likewise, secularists won't hesitate to blame religious bodies when these can be seen to foment war. Whatever our analysis, we speak out.

We, as feminists, if my arguments so far are correct, believe the way gender is constituted in our societies, in particular the kind of qualities fostered as appropriate to 'masculinity' in men and boys, and the significance of the dominance of those values to sustaining patriarchal authority and power – these things are among the causes of war. How well are we voicing that particular 'take' on war in our antiwar activism?

The trouble is that to do this as women, always leads to misunderstandings. As I said before, people think we're being anti-man, or we're saying women are all nonviolent. We know we're not saying that - but it takes a half hour lecture to make it clear to anyone else! So one of the questions I hope you might want to discuss in the small groups is: what more could we do to express our gender 'take' on war, in and through the mainstream peace movement?

But there's a second question. We have an untapped resource. It's men. What about those men we started thinking about at the beginning of this talk. You remember? The ones I asked you to keep in mind. The ones you know, and that you know to be considerate and mild, respectful of women, critical of male dominance, and committed to nonviolence and the peace movement. The ones that sometimes want to attend WILPF events or join the Women in Black vigil.

Are men perhaps better placed than we are to speak out? The number of men who notionally support the women's movement is considerable. But the number that are explicitly modelling a subversive antimilitarist antipatriarchal masculinity are very



few. There aren't many men actually organizing, talking to each other as men about gender issues, taking steps to eliminate power, abuse and exploitation from gender relations. There's a London pro-feminist men's group. There's the admirable White Ribbon campaign. But the numbers are tiny. And I don't know of any such subversive men's groups organized specifically within the peace and antiwar movement.

Can we imagine a men's response to WILPF or Women in Black? I mean a men's organization addressing gender in relation to war and peace. Men coming together and saying 'don't exploit my masculinity for militarism'. Men saying 'the association of men with violence is a huge problem in human civilizations'. Men coming together and saying 'work for gender change is work for peace'. Men telling us how men themselves are deformed and damaged by militarization and war, and organizing to work with military men, and with boys, on these issues?

I really believe that the patriarchal, capitalist, nationalist and racist system we live in is not seriously threatened by a few angry feminists refusing proper gendered behaviour. It can certainly survive women's organizations like WILPF and Women in Black – certainly it can if we remain well-mannered and limit ourselves to publicizing women's suffering in war. Altogether more threatening to the system would be numbers of men refusing to do 'standard-issue manhood', men publicly and collectively refusing the power that the system offers them.

I want to suggest that we go into discussion groups now and explore these two questions:

Let's suppose we want to get our gender critique of militarism, masculinities and men across, first to the peace movement, and next to the wider public....

- (1) What more could we as women in WILPF do?
- (2) What might we hope for from antimilitarist men?