

Reflections on Militarism, Feminism and Peace Work

Phyllis Aronoff
Montréal, Québec

Comiso, Italy; March, 1983: In four days of activities around International Women's Day, a group of women protest both the deployment of nuclear weapons at the nearby American military base and sexual violence against women.¹

Cole Bay, Saskatchewan; August, 1983: Seventy-five native and nonnative women gather to protest cruise missile testing and the government's refusal to recognize the aboriginal right to the land they are using for target shooting. The women hold workshops on feminism and militarism and perform a ritual "banishing symbols of militarism and powerlessness."²

The current wave of women's peace activity in North America and western Europe presents a challenge to both the military machine and the gender system. These women are making the link between the violence and oppressive stereotypes forced on women, and the arms race which threatens to destroy the whole planet. They are rejecting the patriarchal values which give rise to both, and presenting alternative ways of functioning based on feminist values.

At the same time, developments in feminist theory offer new insights into the ideological basis of militarism and its relation to the oppression of women. They provide "a new vision of liberation and a redefinition of progressive politics" grounded in women's experience.³

As a feminist active in the peace movement, I have been encouraged and inspired by the new developments in theory and practice. They have nourished my reflections on feminism and peace work and on the relationship between them. This article is part of that very much unfinished process of reflection.

Patriarchy: From the nuclear family to the nuclear state

The personal is political: this rallying cry of second-wave feminism demystifies the arbitrary separation of human experience into two distinct spheres, the public, political world which is identified with men and assigned a high value, and the private, domestic world, accorded only token

importance and relegated to women. Strength, reason and culture are identified with men, instinct and nature with women. On the basis of this dualism, patriarchy socializes men to insensitivity, "scientific objectivity," competitiveness, and women to "feelings," dependence, nurturing.

As Virginia Woolf observed in *Three Guineas*, that ovular work on war and sexism, "the public and the private worlds are inseparably connected;...the tyrannies and servilities of the one are the tyrannies and servilities of the other."⁴ In the personal world of the nuclear family as in the political world of the nuclear state, one law prevails: that of dominance/submission. The "masculine," reason and culture, is defined in opposition to, and by its domination of, the "feminine," instinct and nature; hence, the very notion of the mastery of nature by technology. The male defines himself as male, becomes male, by subjugating the "feminine" both within and outside himself. Violence is the ultimate expression and sanction of patriarchy.

The recognition of the link between the personal and the political implies as well that the exploration of our personal experience is an important means of understanding larger political dynamics. Two major themes that emerge from this exploration, and which have been prominent in feminist writings of recent years, are those of violence and nurturing.

Women's experience is deeply marked by the violence of men, as the following statistics from the Centre pour les victimes d'assaut sexuel in Montréal demonstrate:

- A rape is committed in Canada every seventeen minutes.
- One child in ten is a victim of sexual abuse, and ninety percent of the victims are girls; in most cases, the abuser belongs to his victim's immediate circle.
- One woman in five in Canada will be sexually assaulted at some time in her life, not counting other forms of physical violence.

The omnipresence of pornography reinforces the message of women's submission and provides an incitement to male violence. *All* women are victims of this violence to the extent that the possibility of violence limits their freedom of movement and keeps them in a state of insecurity and dependence.

In the past ten years, largely through the efforts of feminists, the prevalence in our society of violence against women has been demonstrated and documented. American studies have shown that, far from being exceptional, the psychological profile of the convicted rapist does not differ significantly from that of the general male population.⁵ Does this explain why it is that no effective measures have been taken to correct the situation? Still only a tiny proportion of rapes lead to the conviction of the rapist. Services for women who are victims of male violence are deprived of needed resources and must often rely on volunteer labour. Perhaps the most blatant expression of the dominant attitude to violence against women came from the House of Commons; informed by a Parliamentary Committee on domestic violence that one out of ten Canadian wives is physically abused by her husband, Members reacted with guffaws.

Economic exploitation reinforces the physical violence against women. In Canada, "working women," that is those belonging to the paid work force, earn less than sixty cents for every dollar earned by men. As well, most of them have a second, nonremunerated job, that of homemaker, and many are the sole support of one or more children. Their own and their children's financial dependence prevent many women from leaving abusive husbands.

Nowhere is the role of violence as the ultimate sanction more evident than in the public world. We are constantly surrounded by the symbols of institutionalized violence: armed forces patrolling land, sea and air; police forces, also armed, on the federal, provincial and municipal levels; armed security guards protecting private property; and the glamourized versions of these on television and in the movies. Virtually all of these symbols are masculine, and the few women one sees are in subordinate positions.

Public and private violence reinforce each other in complex ways. Although the violence that occurs in the public world, unlike that in the private world, is most often explicitly directed against men, it is equally marked by misogyny. In fact, misogyny is often used deliberately and systematically as a means of conditioning violent behaviour. This is most evident in the training of soldiers, the purest embodiment of patriarchal values. Recruits are taught to dehumanize not only the enemy, or any potential enemy, but also women.

This is commonly done through the eroticization of violence.⁶ New recruits are continually called "girl" and "faggot" until their behaviour becomes sufficiently aggressive; then they are addressed as "men."⁷

The women of the enemy are part of the booty of war, and it is to protect "their" women, so goes the clichè, that men go to war. But who will protect women from their protectors? According to an American government report on domestic violence, "military service is probably more conducive to violence at home than any other occupation," and even in the civilian population, the incidence of wife-beating is higher among veterans than among men who have never served in the armed forces.⁸ What it is like growing up the daughter of a military man is poignantly evoked in these lines to her father by Canadian singer-songwriter Marie-Lynn Hammond: "You spend your whole life cocked and ready / Oh Papa can't you see we're not the enemy."⁹

The "better half?": Women's nurturing and pacifism

To focus exclusively on women's experience of male violence is to see just half the picture, and only serves to reinforce the negative stereotype of women as passive and powerless, victims and not agents. The other half of the picture is that while most of the world's violence is perpetrated by men, most of its nurturing is done by women. And women's association with feelings, nature and nurturing is not only a measure of our oppression; these subordinate and despised aspects of life have traditionally been a positive resource for women. Possibly they are what has enabled women—and humanity—to survive this long. If we want a feminism that offers more to women than the chance to be pseudo-men, and that presents a real alternative to militarism, we must affirm these values along with our affirmation of women.

There is a widespread view in both the feminist and peace movements that women are naturally pacifists. This is usually attributed to their experience with nurturing, although some, like Petra Kelly of the West German Green Party, go as far as to cite biology:

Woman must lead the efforts in education for peace awareness, because only she, I feel, can go back to her womb, her roots, her natural rhythms, her inner search for harmony and peace, while men, most of them anyway, are continually bound to their power struggle, the exploitation of nature, and military ego trips.¹⁰

In this view, the solution to the problem of militarism, as it is typically framed, is to be found in

bring[ing] maternal thinking to bear upon the social world...women must concern themselves with the nature of public reality, with that social context in which maternal practices occur, rather than limiting their concerns to the smaller world.¹¹

Such a suggestion fails to recognize the subordination of women in our society; furthermore, by not questioning the extent to which "maternal thinking" is socially conditioned, it reinforces the dominant stereotype of women.

The appeal to women's innate or acquired superior qualities as nurturers recalls the discourse of the first-wave feminists. The basis of their plea for participation in public life was that women would extend the purifying values of the home, the seat of all virtue, into the masculine world of competition, violence and war. As several scholars have shown, their acceptance of the dominant ideology of gender was an important factor in their failure to achieve their goal of the empowerment of women, and actually reinforced male dominance in important ways.¹²

Like today's right-to-life movement, repressive regimes have historically invoked women's traditional role as nurturers. Take the following example:

She will be a fighter; strong, of set purpose and powerful, yet at the same time motherly, warm, loving and serving.... It is ... her very motherhood that impels her into the struggle for freedom. This German woman ... stands up for the spiritual battle of liberation behind the front, nursing and strengthening the resurgence of heroism.... [It] is worthwhile to live and die for such German womanhood.¹³

This is an excerpt from the declaration of principles of the women's associations affiliated with the Nazi movement in prewar Germany.

How, then, can feminists affirm women's traditional values while at the same time rejecting gender stereotypes? Integrative feminist theory suggests a way of dealing with this dilemma. Angela Miles reminds us that "neither [feminist practice nor feminist theory] springs autonomically from women's experience. The female standpoint is not identical to the feminist standpoint." Theory and practice can help us to distinguish those elements of our experience that result from women's oppression from those which can serve us. "[B]oth aspects of women's condition are crucial" to Miles' integrative feminist standpoint.

It is a theory and a politics built from both women's oppression and women's potential strength. The two are held in critical tension as two truths of women's condition, both of which point to the necessity and possibility of major social change.¹⁴

In *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich provides an analysis of motherhood—defined to include all tending of the young by women¹⁵—which distinguishes between motherhood as women's experience and as an institution of patriarchal society. She uncovers the apparent paradox that at the same time as patriarchy relegates nurturing to women, it effectively deprives them of control of childbirth and childraising. She identifies "the central ambiguity at the heart of patriarchy: the ideas of the sacredness of motherhood and the redemptive power of woman as means, contrasted with the degradation of women in the order created by men."¹⁶ Rich repudiates the patriarchal glorification of motherhood at the expense of mothers, reclaiming and redefining nurturing as a valuable human activity.

In patriarchal ideology, war is the quintessential masculine experience, just as nurturing is the quintessential feminine experience. Whenever the stereotype of masculine warriorship is invoked, the feminine stereotype invariably follows, if not in the guise of "Suzie Rottencrotch," the American Marines' universal name for women, then in that of "the little woman who keeps the home fires burning." A typical quote is this one from General R. H. Barrow of the U.S. Marines:

War is man's work. Biological convergence on the battlefield would not only be dissatisfying in terms of what women could do, but it would be an enormous psychological distraction for the male who wants to think that he's fighting for that woman somewhere behind, not up there in the same foxhole with him. It tramples the male ego. When you get right down to it, you've got to protect the manliness of war.¹⁷

It would seem that the masculine and feminine stereotypes are interdependent aspects of patriarchal ideology.

Cynthia Enloe has shown how women fulfill functions essential to the military machine in both war and peacetime, as nurses, military wives, prostitutes, and when needed, workers in defense industries. She concludes:

Ignore gender—the social constructions of "femininity" and "masculinity" and the relations between them—and it becomes impossible to adequately explain

how military forces have managed to capture and control so much of society's imagination and resources.¹⁸

Dorothy Dinnerstein, in a very different context, has also shown how women's nurturing, although it appears to be an opposing force to male violence, functions "as a necessary counterpoint to battle, a counterpoint that makes it possible for men to draw back from their will to kill just long and far enough so that they can take it up again with new vigor."¹⁹

We cannot, then, validate one side of the dichotomy and reject the other; we must abolish the dichotomy, and with it all of the "deathly patriarchal separations."²⁰ We need to acknowledge the potential for creative and destructive energy that exists in all of us, women and men. Masculine competitiveness and violence are socially conditioned just as feminine passivity and dependence are—and equally mutable. The antidote to militarism is indeed a good dose of the values associated with nurturing—accompanied by the recognition that these are *human* values worthy of being cultivated in all, and not just half, of humanity. As Rich concludes:

The mother's battle for her child—with sickness, with poverty, with war, with all the forces of exploitation and callousness that cheapen human life—needs to become a common human battle, waged in love and in the passion for survival. But for this to happen, the institution of motherhood must be destroyed.²¹

And with it, I would add, confident of Rich's blessing, militarism.

Feminism and the Peace Movement

It is as difficult to speak of "the" peace movement as it is to speak of "the" feminist movement, because they both encompass a wide range of points of view. Nevertheless, the feminist movement and the peace movement have much in common. The concern with violence occupies an important place in both movements, and in their practice both favour nonviolent methods. The critique of militarism shared by many in the peace movement is similar in many points to the feminist critique of patriarchy. The rank and file of the peace movement is overwhelmingly feminine.

In view of all this, one might expect the peace movement to welcome the contribution of feminism. But the peace movement is as much marked by patriarchal values as any other institution of our society. In its theory it largely ignores the situation of women, and its process tends to reproduce the same power relations found in the society at large, male

leaders and female drudges. It is worth remembering that in Canada as in the U.S., one of the main roots of the second wave of feminism was in the new left antiwar movement of the sixties. That movement's failure to deal, either in theory or in practice, with men's power over women sparked the emergence of a separate women's liberation movement.²²

Today's peace movement, similar in many ways to that of the sixties, is being challenged by feminists strengthened by the experience of the women's movement in the past fifteen years. These peace activists, refusing to be silenced by the fear of "dividing the movement," are insisting that feminist concerns, far from being secondary to the "real questions," are fundamental to the issues of war and peace. Women's peace camps like Greenham have become symbols of women's strength and power; their very existence poses a challenge to stereotypical images of women. Through actions such as these, women are telling the peace movement that it is not enough to oppose this weapon or that weapon, that we need to get to the roots of militarism by opposing the patriarchal values and institutions that sustain it. And they are reaching across the man-made boundaries of nations and blocs to act on their perceptions. An open letter signed by women in five European countries, East and West, where deployment of the new American and Soviet nuclear weapons has begun, states:

we are united by the will for self-determination, to struggle against the culture of militarism in the world, against uniforms and violence, against our children being educated as soldiers and against the senseless waste of resources. We demand the right of self-determination for all individuals and peoples. We want to make a specific contribution to changing existing social structures. That is why we also challenge conventional gender roles and why we ask men to do the same.... Together we want to break this circle of violence and the anxieties created in us by this violence: anxiety about nuclear weapons, fearing the death of humanity and the end of the earth, fears about the rape [of] our bodies and souls.

They conclude, "We do not want a peace which oppresses us, nor a war which will annihilate us."²³

The terms of discourse are being redefined, for the way we think about issues can be limited by the way we define them. Jo Vellacott proposes broadening the notion of peace beyond that of the absence of war, because "injustice, exploitation and discrimination are incompatible with real peace." She also suggests a new definition of power which replaces that of domination with that of inner personal and spiritual re-

sources of each individual.²⁴ Others have suggested redefining national security to mean the well-being of a nation's people rather than the numbers of weapons it possesses.

Feminism challenges the peace movement to deal with its own sexism on the practical level as well. Concern with process is characteristic of feminism, for if the personal is political, then our interpersonal relations must necessarily reflect our political ideals. The following elements have emerged from intensive experimentation with group process based on feminist principles:

- organization in small groups, so that each individual can have the most input possible
- nonhierarchical structure, so that both leadership and support functions may be shared by all members of the group
- sharing of information, skills and support
- consensual decision-making
- making the connection between people's experience and "the larger questions"
- making connections between issues
- the use of means consistent with the ends sought
- acknowledging and dealing with sexist, racist, or other oppressive dynamics when they occur.²⁵

Perhaps the most important point about these guidelines—for they are guidelines, not rules—is that, as a woman from the Greenham Common peace camp stated simply, *they work*.²⁶ They provide for a group process that empowers everyone involved rather than some at the expense of others. Although they are not inconsistent with the peace movement's expressed goals, they do conflict with its tendency to favour unified (and therefore, necessarily limited) objectives such as stopping cruise testing or Star Wars, centralized control, speaking with one voice.

Feminists have tended to be most active at the grass roots level of the peace movement, where there is the greatest concentration of women and where it is easier to function on an egalitarian basis. At the level of larger groups, feminists' demands have been relatively modest, for example, that childcare be provided during large conferences—it was not at the International Conference on Economic Conversion that took place in Boston in June, 1984—or that half of the delegates to a convention be women—a demand refused by the Liaison Committee of the END (European Nuclear Disarmament) Convention, July, 1985, in Amsterdam.²⁷

Women in the peace movement still have, all too often, to face the double bind described by Jean Elshtain:

Concerns that arise "naturally" from their position in the private sphere, including the health, education, and welfare of children, are deemed private expressions of personal values, but any hard-nosed realistic talk about power from women means that they have forfeited the right to represent to the public sphere the private world that they have presumably forsaken.²⁸

The first half of this dilemma is beginning to change. For example, in the past year more than one male peace activist has expressed to me, usually in private, his willingness to see woman-oriented values play a larger part in the peace movement. They have been quite willing to accept the idea of women's nurturing healing the world—and themselves. When they begin to express a similar degree of enthusiasm for the idea of women exercising power *on our own terms*, and the loss of power that would mean for them, feminists will be able to rejoice in their conversion to our cause.

Until then, feminists will likely continue, in both separate and mixed groups, to work against militarism, against patriarchy, for peace. We want a world of peace and justice not only for our children—we want it for ourselves.

NOTES

1. "Notes," *END: Journal of European Nuclear Disarmament*, April/May 1983, p. 4.
2. Vye Bouvier, "Women's Peace Camp — On the Border," *New Breed Journal*, Oct. 1983, p. 18.
3. Angela Miles, *Feminist Radicalism in the 1980's* (Montreal: New World Perspectives/C.J.P.S.T., 1985), p. 3.
4. Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (London: Hogarth, 1938), p. 258.
5. Andrea Dworkin, *Our Blood: Prophecies and Discourses on Sexual Politics* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), p. 33.
6. Examples abound in Warnock, "Patriarchy is a Killer: What People Concerned About Peace and Justice Should Know," *Reweaving the Web of Life: Feminism and Nonviolence*, Pam McAllister, ed. (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1982), p. 22.
7. Helen Michalowski, "The Army Will Make a 'Man' Out of You," in McAllister, p. 330.
8. Quoted in Cynthia Enloe, *Does Khaki Become You?: The Militarization of Women's Lives* (Boston: South End Press, 1983), p. 87.
9. Quoted in Heather Menzies, "'Our time is now' — the Canadian Women's Music and Cultural Festival," *Canadian Woman Studies/Les Cahiers de la Femme*, Spring 1985, vol. 6, no. 2, p. 90.
10. *Fighting for Hope* (Boston: South End Press, 1984), p. 104. A similarly reductive analysis is often applied to male aggression, in which missiles and other weapons are seen as simply more powerful substitutes for men's original weapon, the penis.
11. Jean Bethke Elshtain, "On Beautiful Souls, Just Warriors and Feminist Conscientiousness," *Women's Studies International Forum*, vol. 5, no. 3/4, 1982, p. 347.
12. See Judith Walkowitz, "Male Vice and Female Virtue: Feminism and the Politics of Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century Britain," in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell and Sharon Thompson, eds. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), pp. 419-38. Also surprisingly in view of the above quotation, Jean Bethke Elshtain, "Aristotle, the Public-Private Split, and the Case of the Suffragists" in Elshtain, ed., *The Family in*

- Political Thought* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1982), pp. 51-65.
13. Guida Diehl, "A New Type of Woman," reprinted in *European Women: A Documentary History, 1789-1945*, Eleanor S. Riemer and John C. Fout, eds. (New York: Schocken, 1980), pp. 108-9.
 14. Miles, pp. 22 and 28.
 15. Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: Bantam, 1977), p. xiv.
 16. Rich, p. 69.
 17. Quoted in Enloe, p. 127.
 18. Enloe, p. 212.
 19. Dorothy Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and Human Malaise* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), p. 226.
 20. Miles, p. 13.
 21. Rich, p. 285.
 22. Miles, p. 4 and p. 32, note 5.
 23. "An open letter by women, East and West, to all citizens of Europe," *Disarmament Campaigns*, April 1985, p. 18. The countries are Czechoslovakia, Italy, Britain, and East and West Germany.
 24. "Women, Peace and Power," in McAllister, pp. 34 and 37.
 25. Leslie Cagan, "Feminism and Militarism," in *Beyond Survival: New Directions for the Disarmament Movement*, Michael Albert and David Dellinger, eds. (Boston: South End Press, 1983), p. 106.
 26. Jill Gillett, personal communication.
 27. Fiona Weir, "Women and END Convention," *Disarmament Campaigns*, April 1985, p. 14.
 28. Elshtain, "Aristotle," p. 65.

Debutante

Summoning a daylong smile
 like a princess at festival time
 sashed with the name of home
 in prim white
 puffed sleeves, heels and all
 I did not run
 and even remembered
 to say "excuse me" to the tourist lady
 before I chained to the White House fence.

And at the police station
 I was not the one
 who climbed the cell bars
 sang boisterously
 or danced on the table.
 I even remembered
 to call the officer "sir"
 when I was booked.

Momma would be proud.

Lenny Liane
 Alexandria, Virginia