the gendered embroilments of war

For the last few years – but especially since 11 September 2001 – our daily newspapers and nightly news have been saturated with images of death and destruction on such grand scale that for some there is a fear that human beings are becoming anaesthetized to the everyday tragedies of loss and dispossession – the inevitable corollaries of war. For many, the bloody images, alongside the incessant posturing of the power elite, lubricate the machinery that primes audiences to accept the necessity of future wars on the basis of those vague but hallowed notions of ‘national security’ and the faceless but ever-present ‘terror’. Alongside this fear, however, there can be indifference towards the suffering and violence wrought against others. This special issue was envisaged and produced through our political commitment against and horror at unrelenting conflict and aggression. As Jean Said Makdisi writes in this issue ‘I am sick to death of violence, death, and ruin and waste. And I am sick also of compromise, surrender and defeat. I am sick of the corruption and cruelty of the world in which we live, of which war is but the tip of the iceberg’. To echo a heartfelt comment by Frosh: ‘Under such circumstances and in the midst of such clouds of darkness, one wonders if any lessons ever get learned’ (Frosh 2002: 389).

What has made these wars so urgently relevant to us is both that women are disproportionate casualties of these wars – as refugees, rape victims, casualties and combatants – and that the universe of structures and symbols surrounding gender are mobilized to represent these wars as something legitimate, honourable or desirable. But women have also been visibly present in the massive movements that have opposed these wars and have drawn inspiration from their historic foremothers who have themselves questioned wars waged in their names. Their activism keeps at bay the sense of impotence and powerlessness that threatens to overwhelm us in the face of the military, economic and political juggernaut that is the war machine.

This collection of essays and articles speaks directly and eloquently to these concerns. By viewing large-scale collective violence and war through the prism of gender, this issue seeks to contribute to wider debate across the disciplines on the effects of war on women; on the ways in which the

semiotics of gender are deployed to justify or shape violence; and on historical and contemporary feminist challenges to war. The articles provide in-depth analyses and reflection from feminist academics, writers, activists and journalists. Not only have we included scholarly works, but the journal's Open Space section provides a forum for discussing the concerns of women differently located across borders or social divides, including within or without academia. There are book reviews that also contribute to the theme of this issue. There are absences, however, and these have troubled us. Even though we invited and actively chased pieces on Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, southern Africa, and West Africa, authors currently writing on these areas were themselves overwhelmed by the demands of these underrepresented conflicts and could not contribute. These absences, however, reflect broader political and cultural concerns and silences, and perhaps not surprisingly, a significant number of the contributions grapple with the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East.

Struggles over natural resources – oil in the Middle East, diamonds in West Africa, Coltan in central Africa, and water in Sudan and elsewhere – underlie the conflicts that are presented as defences of persons, properties, or ideologies. As V. Spike Peterson argues in her article there are now dramatic increases in human rights violations and civilian casualties. New wars now dominate (different conflicts, aggressions, violations) and civilians are frequently a target through attempts to control populations through fear, hatred and the literal expulsion of the other. Moreover, as Peterson illustrates, these new wars produce and coincide with a different globalized economy in which the informal economy facilitates (maybe even demands) transnational flows of licit and illicit resources. Focusing on a tripartite of reproductive, productive and virtual economies Peterson documents and analyses how these fiscal intersections are gendered. Women are positioned to take and also actively assume responsibility for sustaining families, kinship and networks and this responsibility, alongside the increase in female-headed households, increases the pressures on women to cope. In short, these new wars are destroying basic infrastructures and traditional labour patterns with disastrous effects on corruption, criminality and militarized conflict.

Janina Struk in her evocative essay asks us to understand the use of photographs of distressed and terrified women who 'have involuntarily become universal symbols of suffering and pain'. Images of passive women who are homeless, stateless, poor and vulnerable are used to prove and to shock but they are frequently presented without full attention to their context, and without adequate explanation they do not help us to understand. More provocatively, Struk urges us to reflect on our own political and emotional complicity as we are positioned as spectators or voyeurs of cruelty and suffering, for 'images of the repulsive also allure'. It is this fascination with that which should repulse that concerns Struk, alongside the absence of representations of defiant women.

Nayanika Mookherjee and Roxanne Varzi both, in their separate pieces, draw upon films, poetry and songs to document and analyse gendered representations of two different geo-political wars. Mookherjee, in an updated revision of her earlier piece, focuses on Bangladesh in 1971, while Varzi concentrates on discourses in Iran following the Iran/Iraq war. Both of them are engaged with tracing through and analysing the dominant symbolic imaginary of woman as mother. Motherhood is frequently the only available public space for women, and even then, only the respectable, self-sacrificing mother. Hence, only as an idealized woman can women be admitted into a nationalist view. This restrictive space has profound implications for the subjectivities of women who are mothers and for women who are not.

Mookherjee explores the fraught relationship between gender and the nation and the gendered symbolization of the nation. The rhetoric of the motherland, she argues, is a particular use of women in the context of the national struggle in Bangladesh in which representations of the landscape are laden with the 'mother' and so the landscape is both feminized and replete with political and emotive meanings. The discourses, however, embed rhetoric against the women who have been raped. Rape during collective violence is a political act as it is a ritual of victory, a defilement of enemy honour and territory, and it functions as retribution and humiliation. For the middle-class, their resistive politics lay alongside the judgements that locate the raped women in a place of taboo and transgression. Lindsey German in her contribution illustrates how rape is a weapon of war and another instrument in the way that women are used and humiliated. She argues that degradation and humiliation are psychological and political means that are integral to the way soldiers operate.

Roxanne Varzi concentrates on state rhetoric, propaganda and authority in Iran following the vicious Iran/Iraq war to argue that middle-class Iranian women are frequently caught between dominant discourses of the secular and the religious and the idea of womanhood versus motherhood. Needless-to-say, in Iran (as elsewhere) dominant and prevalent public discourses focus on the self-sacrificing mother. The heroic mother is strong and resolute, and above all, a firm believer in the Islamic state, and she illustrates her determination by sending her son off to war. Ambivalence is repressed out of sight, but, for Varzi, the strength of Rakhshan Bani-Etemad's films is that they focus on dilemmas, contradictions and the ongoing role 'women have had to play as caregivers post-war, a role that has bound them as living martyrs to the legacy and tragedy of the war'. This heroism is different to that which gets counted, but exists nonetheless.

Chris Coulter's article traces through women's participation in the fighting and conflict in Sierra Leone, drawing upon extracts from interviews that she conducted with female fighters to illustrate their various motivations, choiceless decisions and engagements with war. War, as Coulter points out, is not a-social but rather is part of the existing social order, and creates a different social and

political order; in short it challenges and reinforces what has gone before. Coulter challenges two dominant, yet contradictory, views of women – women as heroic victims, and women who fight as monsters, who are unnatural and more ruthless than men – and argues that different experiences drive women to fight. Some do so through choice, others under threat and some for survival, and various emotions – fear, anger and resignation – abound. Coulter carefully analyses the narratives of women as victims or perpetrators to argue that although women are active participants in war, supporters and advocates of armed struggle, women's choices are constrained and circumscribed. The oppositional discourses of women as heroes or monsters do not further our understanding, for after all, as Coulter points out, 'one does not stop being a victim by committing a violent act, just as one does not escape being a perpetrator just because one is also a victim'.

Many of our contributors focus on women as resisters of war, conflict and aggression. Nadjie Al-Ali and Nicola Pratt provide an account of women's political activities and participation in public life in Iraq following the invasion by the US and UK. Al-Ali and Pratt provide an account of how initially political spaces opened up in Iraq but are now curtailed through increasing violence, misjudgements and incompetence. They trace through the various political activities of diverse women's organizations, both past and present. Some organizations do have a broad membership, but many of the women involved in women's organizations tend to be urban-based and middle-class, although they do come from various ethnic and religious backgrounds. While there are different demands about the occupation, the women's organizations are united in opposition to an aspect of the Iraqi constitution (Article 41), which focuses on women's rights. Needless-to-say, fear of violence impedes women's participation in the public sphere, as ordinary men and women are caught in the cross-fire of the conflicts, and political activities are both provoked and constrained by the social and political context.

Lynne Segal illustrates how there is always a particular story to tell about violence, which is specific to its own time and place and always includes the ambiguities of its gendered dynamics. Such stories, argues Segal, are never merely the operation of universal truths or inevitabilities – whether seen as biological, cultural or psychological. Segal asserts that it is too simplistic to see the gender divide as a reliable guide to women's commitment to peace: women's relation to war and peace is varied and complex even if wars are often waged in supposed protection of 'women and children' (motifs frequently run together as one with no space in between). Women have played, and play, a crucial role in wartime in their support for soldiers and contempt for those who refuse to fight. In this way, Segal and Coulter's analysis coincide in their attention to women who are active in their support for conflict. Segal concentrates on the Israeli occupation of Palestine and pays particular attention to Israeli women's peace organizations. For example, Refusal (an Israeli peace organization) interrogates

the links between militarism and gender to argue that militarism bolsters the rhetoric of machismo as it ignores the actual effect on actual men who disproportionately suffer from drug abuse, depression and stress. It follows that the high rates of suicide among Israeli men remain unreported, since to talk about men's depression would undermine the myth that war is good for men.

Focusing on Colombia, Melissa Herman tells of the long history of conflict that has led to the corrosion of civil society and the continuing brutal attacks – sexual, physical and psychological – on women. But again, women are actively struggling against the violence, degradation and deterioration of peaceful spaces. Peace communities have been created, for example City of Women which houses women who have survived attacks and provides training, everyday sustenance and infrastructures for women to recover and engage in daily living.

Jean Said Makdisi reflects on her own and her family's experiences of war in Lebanon, and asks the crucial if despairing question – where are the alternatives? She throws down a challenge to feminism to ask how complicit are feminists in (unwittingly or not) perpetuating the existing political, economic and militaristic dominant structures. For Makdisi, feminism has failed to continually challenge the cruelty, indignities and inequalities which abound, as feminists have become acquiescent with striving for status, power and fulfilling individual ambitions. It is a vexed issue, articulated by Virginia Woolf among others: should we as feminists remain outside the dominant political structures and insist on building an alternative world shaped on principles of justice and equality?

Contributions to this issue do not just focus on the war-torn places beyond the borders of this country but also provide valuable commentary on women's activism in the UK.

Elane Heffernan concentrates on a particular area in East London – Newham – to document the issues relating to the experience of the refugee, migrant and ethnic communities. Heffernan tells us how the Labour Government's concepts of humanitarian intervention, integration and citizenship undermine the multi-cultural atmosphere in which local residents previously had felt secure and empowered. The story does not end there, for local residents protest, oppose and engage in political activity.

Salma Yaqoob describes the involvement of women in the anti-war movement to illustrate how Muslim women have been anything but passive, as many have actively engaged in political and public activity. Women's political activism has an honourable tradition in the UK as in the Middle East, South Asia, and elsewhere. Muslim women faced many challenges – following 9/11 and 7/7 – and through their political engagement they are carving out a new chapter in the struggle for women's equality.

This issue demands: it demands political responses, emotional reflection, grappling with that which is challenging and uncomfortable. The issue also demands acts of imagination and of responsibility to enable a just and democratic social and political global order. Jacqueline Rose, in an essay *Apathy and Accountability* (2003), explores the meaning of apathy in political life to argue that 'what you don't do as a political subject can have effects and might be as important in the transformations of the world as what you do' (p. 220). Rose goes on to assert that 'the ways in which we do not implicate ourselves in the burdens of history' may be difficult to talk about as they require a recognition of indifference, of the pain of witnessing, of feeling, indeed being, helpless in the face of the might and superiority of global structures (ibid.). The issues of identification and affiliation endure and require us to think through our bonds, commitments and that which makes up decent and fair public life. Judith Butler (2003) has argued that feminism has much to contribute to the challenges before us as it helps provide responses to a number of troublesome questions on violence, moral responses to aggression, the vexed issue of victim and perpetrator. Feminism demands of us a different imaginative act that begins to prise apart the world as it is and work towards establishing a body politic based on recognition (troublesome as that is) and ties that unite.

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