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Getting to peace: what kind of movement?

Today's antiwar movements could become wider and deeper and more united if they took the critique of gender properly to heart

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I went to see the film *Avatar* the other day. As you know, it's about a people, the Na'vi, on another planet: Pandora. They have a culture that is respectful of nature, unexploitative, integrated and empathetic with other life forms. Unfortunately they also have a mineral that people of planet Earth lust after. Human space ships and personnel are out to destroy this pleasant people and appropriate their valuable resource. The film ends 'happily'. The Na'vi prevail over the mighty and ruthless, technologized, militarized (and evidently American) invaders. But, the outcome is achieved by - an apocalyptic war.

Why did the story have to culminate in war? It cannot be beyond the bounds of the script writer's imagination to have had the Na'vi prevail over Earthlings in some other way. Maybe they could have *melted* the invaders' technology away? Maybe they could have won over their hearts and minds? Maybe the lush vegetation of Pandora could have quietly consumed them and turned them into fertile compost? But no, a war, of course, there had to be. It is the climax that every child, adolescent and adult watching the film is waiting for. They would feel cheated without it. *Avatar* would not have been the supreme box office success it is without a war.

Diana Francis, in the [third](#) of her series of articles, asks 'what underlies war's continuing widespread acceptance?' This is a useful approach to the roots of war, in my view, because it opens up to questions about society, people, you and me, who are implicitly the ones to accept (or question, or refuse) war. It invites us to interrogate a film like *Avatar*, which is so characteristic of the culture we live in, the culture that enables, limits and shapes us. It leads to an exploration of the continuum of violence, the connections between the explosive violence of actual war, the perennial violence inherent in our militarized condition, and violence in everyday life and everyday culture.

If Mary Kaldor is right (see her [contribution](#) to this debate, 'Reconceptualizing War') in saying that wars are very often fought, not to be won but rather as a kind of mutual enterprise in which the warring parties share some benefits, this too must point us towards an examination of cultures. Some of the benefits that war-making people and classes gain from the perpetuation of armed conflict will certainly be economic. But some may be advantages in self-identity as men, or regard and status with regard to other people and groups. What messages are we taking in, telling each other, that make fighting, deliberate injury and killing, seem reasonable, desirable – even glorious?

Avatar is just one of a zillion instances of cultural production that normalize and glorify fighting, militarization and war. And this violent culture in which we're

immersed is profoundly gendered, as Diana Francis, and Shelley Anderson in her [recent article](#) 'Vital Peace Constituencies', point out. Gendered mindsets, expectations, behaviours and attitudes feed and are fed by films like this, by video games, advertising, the fashion industry and TV reality shows, that bombard our consciousness day in and day out. Masculinity and femininity are endlessly constituted in idealized, contrasted and complementary forms that are parodies of real human 'being'. We are made over as avatars fitted out for a virtual world in which each sex is a truncated, incomplete human being, a world in which he will survive violence and deal it out, while she will allure, invite and comply. The feminist women and pro-feminist men who resist such deformation are so marginal to the narrative they scarcely make the list of credits. And, unfortunately, this is no cinema fantasy but the very world we live in.

Gender struggle in the peace movement

One thing I have discovered during research in and among peace movements is that a gender struggle goes on in them too. The majority of organizations are mixed. They have many women in the membership, though frequently the leading personalities and spokes-persons are male. In most countries however there are a handful of feminist antiwar, antimilitarist and peace organizations. These are often differentiated from the mainstream peace movements of which they are a part, and to which they contribute, by one particular quality. While they don't fail to pay attention to the large-scale issues and events that concern all peace movements – weapons of mass destruction, huge global military expenditures, the worldwide system of United States military bases, and so on – they simultaneously call attention to more mundane violence and the individual lives it affects, to pain, care and responsibility.

For instance, *Okinawan Women Act Against Military Violence (OWAMMV)*, like the rest of the Japanese peace movement, are concerned with the huge burden of the US bases that spread their razor wire all over the archipelago. But they also campaign against the abuse, rape and murder of individual women that is too often associated with the areas of bars and brothels surrounding these bases. *OWAMMV's* first act on learning of a new assault, however, is always to check on the wellbeing of the victim before launching (yet another) mass protest against the system that has harmed her. Likewise, In South Korea, *Women Making Peace* are notable for having introduced into the movement a stress on 'peace culture', changing lives and practices, starting with one's own. Which does not mean they don't go out to join demonstrations against sending troops to Afghanistan or Iraq, or join in the campaign for the reunification of Korea. They do that too.

After spending time with the women of many such organizations, and as a member, myself, of both Women in Black and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, it seems to me that together we are introducing a fresh new thought into the field of international relations and war studies. We are saying: if the gendered cultures of violence in everyday life bring about 'widespread acceptance of war', then gender relations, as we know and live them, must be recognized as, in fact, *causal* in war. I have argued as much in an article appearing next month in the *International Feminist Journal of Politics*.¹

A predisposing cause

Most visible in the news analysis of any given war, of course, are economic factors (access to resources and markets). And yes, fair enough, capitalist expansionism and corporate interests certainly do motivate war-making governments and other social actors. Also visible, perhaps more hyped, in the conventional analysis are political factors. And, indeed, wars often are about the control or exclusion of particular kinds of people (the ones the wrong side of a border, the ones with the wrong god, or skin colour, or national name). Sometimes these two sets of motivations are summed up as 'greed and grievance', or 'capitalism and nationalism' or 'class and race'. But the male power system (still widely called patriarchy, for lack of a better name) is intertwined with the capitalist mode of production and the nation-state system among the causes of war. As a source of cultures that produce sexual divisions – sexual divisions of labour, of war, of love – gender power relations ready us all the time for violence. They are a *predisposing* cause.

Raewyn Connell, a well-known theoretician of masculinity and gender power, [endorses](#) this view. She writes that 'masculinities are the forms in which many dynamics of violence take shape'. While the causes of war are many, therefore, and include 'dispossession, poverty, greed, nationalism, racism, and other forms of inequality, bigotry and desire... Yet given the concentration of weapons and the practices of violence among men, gender patterns appear to be strategic' ².

If gender relations are indeed one of the root causes of war, it follows that transformative change in gender relations must be part of the effort for peace. Gender work is peace work. This opens the door to men in the peace movement. To quote R.W. Connell once again, 'Evidently, then, 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 emphasise violence, confrontation and domination, and replacing them with patterns of masculinity more open to negotiation, cooperation and equality'.

Men in the peace movement

Men in the peace movement could step through that open door now and work on a critique of the manipulation of masculinity for militarism, making it a conscious part of their antiwar activism. They could say, as we wrote on our banner at the Women's Gate of the Aldermaston Blockade a month ago, 'No fists, no knives, no guns, no bombs. No to all violence'. Such a simple slogan links, in one giddy move, bedroom and battlefield, the violence of so-called peace and that of so-called war, in a single continuum. That is, I think, a concept with a perspective capable of inspiring a movement on a matching scale.

War culture is hegemonic in our society. It's the prevailing common-sense. The antiwar movement is, by comparison, patchy, disparate, and on some issues even divided. Parts of it focus on nuclear weapons, parts on the arms trade, parts on contemporary war-fighting. Its discourses include various kinds of socialism, pacifism, feminism – and those of various religions. These sectors and segments pull together on some issues, part company on others. To prevail over the taken-for-granted militarism of the dominant culture I believe the movement has to follow the lead of organizations such as OWAAMV and *Women Making Peace*, and others like them in different countries, and allow a critique of gender to become a prompt to reinterpret and transform the peace movement, its aims, its structures and its own

cultures. What is today a movement *against war* could become something wider and deeper, effectively a counter-hegemonic movement, a nonviolent movement for a nonviolent world.

1 Cockburn, Cynthia (2010 forthcoming) 'Gender Relations as Causal in Militarization and War: A Feminist Standpoint'. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, Vol.12, No.2. May.

² Connell, R.W. (2002) 'Masculinities, the reduction of violence and the pursuit of peace' in Cockburn, Cynthia and Dubravka Zarkov (eds) *The Postwar Moment: Militaries, Masculinities and International Peacekeeping*. London: Lawrence and Wishart. Pp.33-40.