

**Centre for Gender Studies
School of Oriental and African Studies,
University of London**

**Celebratory event to honour the feminist research and
activism
of Cynthia Cockburn
October 13-14, 2017**

Day 1: Seminar Session:
“Comparative Feminist Reflections on War and Peace”

Cynthia Cockburn’s talk:
“A feminist take on violence and war”

First, may I add my thanks to the Centre for Gender Studies and Feminist Review for hosting and funding this two-day event. And a special thank you to Nadjie and Awino for their wonderful generosity in featuring my research when framing today’s seminar on gender, war and peace. Thank you both! You can’t imagine how affirming and encouraging this event is for me.

Secondly, I want to thank Cynthia Enloe for her generous mention of my work just now. And I want to say once more what every feminist in our field says time and again, but none of us can say enough: your work, Cynthia, is totally foundational for us. Our shelves are stacked with your ground-breaking books. I think the earliest I have is *Does Khaki Become You?*, and then there was *Bananas, Beaches and Bases?* They date back to the eighties. My copies are so dog-eared the print on the spines is worn away. But since then, so many wise and helpful interventions: I specially valued *Maneuvers*. Now there’s this new one about to arrive: *The Big Push*. Probably, like me, you’ve all got a copy on order for its publication date in 12 days time. Your thought, Cynthia, the coherence and power of your argument, and your wonderful accessibility and informality (which we’ve seen again today), they’ve fostered, and go on fostering, a whole new generation of feminists. Thank you for that!

In the few minutes I’ll be speaking, I’d like to focus on what in my writing I’ve suggested is a way of seeing the connection between the gender relation and violence in all its forms. I want to stress that it’s not that I’ve conceptualized this out of the blue. ‘My’ theory (‘my’ in quotes), is simply a formulation of what I’ve learned from brave and creative women actually living in conflict and organizing for peace. I’ve had the good luck to be able to visit and interview scores of such women over 25 years – in Northern Ireland, Bosnia, Israel Palestine, Cyprus, Japan, Korea and half a dozen other countries. Two key things they’ve taught me...

First, I’ve learned that it helps to think of violence as a continuum – or several continua. There’s a time continuum (violence pre-war, in war-time,

and after war); and a continuum of scale (from the blow of a fist to the explosion of a nuclear weapon). What's more, violence is a gendered continuum. Identifying the gender relation in there helps us see connections between instances of violence and perhaps a way of interrupting the continuum.

The second thing I've learned from these women is that gender may be understood as not only manifest in, but actually causal of, all forms of violence, up to and including militarization and war.

Someone who springs to mind when I say these things is Suzuyo Takazato, the key activist in OWAAM, Women Act Against Military Violence, in the hugely militarized Japanese island of Okinawa. From her perspective, opposing the Japan-US Security Treaty involves resisting violence at many points on the scale, from the threat of stationing US nuclear weapons down to the rape of an Okinawan schoolgirl by a US Marine. Suzuyo readily uses the term "the gendered continuum of violence".

Also, like a lot of other activist women I've met - I'm thinking of Aida Santos in the Philippines, and Marina Zapatas in Colombia, but a lot of others besides - Suzuyo wasn't afraid to use the difficult word 'patriarchy', when a lot of academic feminists were avoiding it as "structuralist". It's they who gave me the courage to persist in using it in my search for causality.

I think of it this way...As feminists in this post-modernist era we rightly stress the notion of 'intersectionality' to describe relationships at the individual level. In an 'intersectional' approach we see any one individual as positioned in and shaped by several intersecting power relations - for a start: those of economic class, ethnicity, and gender. A white, owning-class and male individual has a different life experience from a black, working class woman.

But I'm left with the question: where do we look to see the source of these power relations that shape individual chances? We surely have to look upwards and outwards, to those society-wide things we used to call 'structures'. OK, let's call them 'meta-processes' - that sounds less rigid, perhaps, and recognizes that they are capable of changing and developing gradually over time. Think of the economic system; deriving power from wealth; and the racializing power of ethno-nationalism in tribes and nations. These two systemic phenomena at least are surely undeniable. But right there, intersected with them in every human institution - in every corporation, every church, every family - is a third power system, the sex-gender order - which, with minor modifications, seems to have been, for millennia, one in which men exercise power over women. 'Patriarchy' for short. Together these systemic power processes produce inequalities among us as individuals in the here and now.

What's more - all three of them are intrinsically violent. Because it takes force to constitute the self as an inferiorized, exploited other. People don't submit willingly to being the landless labourer, the despised minority, or women cast as men's property. So together these power processes cause

interpersonal violence, strife, militarization and war. Of course gender is never the sole cause of war. It's not even very often an immediate cause. But it's an underlying cause, a predisposing factor, making the use of force always a likely choice.

I've chosen to represent this theory, of "gender as causal in militarization and war", evolved by activist women like Suzuyo, as a standpoint, in the Marxist sense of standpoint – meaning an understanding of the world generated by a particular collective social actor in struggle. For Lukacs and others, the "proletarian standpoint" was the theory collectively derived by the working class from its experience of struggle in labour. Nancy Hartsock then introduced the idea of a feminist standpoint in women's labour. I'm suggesting, furthermore, that women may be understood as collectively deriving a feminist standpoint from our gender-specific experience of, and struggle against, violence in all its forms.

Now - our conference organizers have asked us to focus on the current moment and what new thinking may be needed right now. Well, I always like to listen to Raewyn Connell, in Australia. She writes, (quote) 'Given the concentration of weapons and the practices of violence among men...gender relations appear to be strategic. Masculinities are the forms in which many dynamics of violence take shape ...Evidently (she says) a strategy for demilitarization and peace must include a strategy of change in masculinities.'

So, yes, I agree - that's the first thing. We have to make the shaping and reshaping of masculinities a policy issue. Oddly, it just isn't, at present. There's a strange blank where policy ought to be.

Ann Oakley, whose book *Sex, Gender and Society* so shaped our thinking in the 1970s, happens to be a neighbour of mine today, and recently we've compared notes on our newspaper reading. We'd both noticed something about news articles reporting sex crime. Let's say a report from a certain city of an epidemic of sexual abuse, abuse of "women and children". Throughout such an article we'd noticed how reference would be made to "abusers", "perpetrators", and so on ...but in gender-neutral terms like that, their sex not actually specified. No mention of the words man, men or masculine. It's implicit of course - the man in the perpetrator. But he's too often taken for granted, not clearly stated. It's a kind of coy invisibilizing of the sex of the offender, and it has a serious effect - the policy that's prompted by such an epidemic of abuse tends to deal only with the victims. The authors will call for (quote) "better protection of women and children". You never read, or hear (quote) "What is it with men? Why is it that 95% of all violent crime in the UK is committed by men, 99% in the case of sexualized violent crime?" Think about it: if men stopped being violent, overnight, violent crime in this country would fall to less than 5% of what it is!

So, I'd argue that our primary task as feminists working in this field today is to press for this missing policy. It clearly has to happen in and through both public sector and voluntary sector initiatives. It has to include parental guidance; guidance for nursery and playgroup staff; for those who

teach and develop the curriculum in primary and secondary schools; and for those training in the field of youth work and sport. It must involve steps for which there's probably no precedent – what about work with toy manufacturers and marketers? And, of course, engagement with the media – how to stem the continual flood of violent videos, films, serials and programmes? An important development would be action by men themselves. Do you know the White Ribbon Campaign? It's small as yet - but a truly encouraging example of how men can bond with men around a commitment to non-violence.

The problem is that there are three current developments we need to take account of, as feminists activating for such policies. All three require us to generate deeper, more subtle and more pertinent understandings.

First, the nature / nurture debate about gender differences is by no means laid to rest. The nature argument keeps resurfacing – for instance you may have read Louann Brizendine's book *The Female Brain*, which stresses hormone-driven neurological differences as a physical cause of divergent male and female behaviours. But nurture is again reasserted in new ways - Cordelia Fine has just won a prize for her new book *Testosterone Rex*, which sets out precisely to “unmake the myth of gendered minds”. We have to stay with this debate and its implications for policy.

The second change occurring as we speak is that more and more men and women are contradicting gender stereotypes. We're seeing many more women in authoritative positions. Look at Angela Merkel, Marine Le Pen, Theresa May. Even our new Commissioner of the London Metropolitan Police, the biggest police chief in the country, is a woman. Cressida Dick is her name. This would have been unthinkable till recently. Some people are arguing that these developments undermine feminist theory. But we know we can expect Cressida Dick's experience in the job to be different from what her male predecessor experienced. Just as research shows that women soldiers experience army service differently from male soldiers. Because the innovators don't escape dominant gender power relations - they continue to be framed within them.

Third, there are big developments afoot in and around LGBT – and I, Intersex Those outing themselves or being identified as not fitting a simple binary understanding of gender are growing in number, and are having an ever greater impact as a social movement. This is a challenge for a feminist theory of war and violence which often leans heavily on the gender binary. But it's a welcome challenge. Violence is a choice. And what better starting place for un-choosing violence than un-choosing a standard binary gender identity.

Anyway - enough from me. Thank you for giving me this chance to chip in a few thoughts to what I know's going to be a fantastic and inspiring exchange of ideas this weekend. And a recommitment of energies, I'm sure.

