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**Feminist antimilitarism:
A global social movement?**

In London I belong to a women's group opposing militarism and war, part of the international network Women in Black. We're a group of maybe 40 or 50 women joined by an email list. We have weekly 'vigils' on the street in Central London on a Wednesday evening, alerting people about the position of women in wars and mobilizing passers-by to make demands on our own government to change policy on a whole lot of things that range from support for the arms trade, to the alliance with the USA to invade Iraq. Some of us go to different countries, like Palestine, to work alongside women there.

Recently I've started to be more analytical about our group in London, and about women activists like us in other countries. In my working life I'm feminist researcher, in sociology, focusing particularly on the connection between gender and processes of war and peace. In the last few years I've done research working very closely with women's organizations that are attempting to deal with difficult relationships across ethnic differences that are being exaggerated by war – for instance in Northern Ireland, in Israel/Palestine, Cyprus and in Bosnia Herzegovina.

But right now I've decided to work for two years on the question: Can we call feminist antimilitarism a global social movement?

My work is usually participatory action research. That is research where you are inside the action and you don't attempt to be scientifically neutral (which is anyway impossible) but where you positively want the research to clarify and support the action.

So, methodologically, being 'in' Women in Black, what I'm doing on feminist antimilitarism is research from an insider perspective. And that carries certain ethical responsibilities – for instance always giving first priority to the needs of the action, if there's any conflict of interest with the needs of the research. And trying to give women back their own words, give them a degree of control over what I say they're saying.

I'm experimenting with using a weblog (an interactive website) as a tool in the research – putting material that isn't yet finalized into a space where women can comment on it. Anybody who does research will know that this makes you very nervous. You want to hold onto the material until you're very sure and certain. But it can be better to exchange ideas that are *in process*, before you get too attached to them. And that's what I'm doing here and now.

I have five main questions in the research. First I want to find out who we are and where we are...a kind of mapping. Because even in Women in Black we don't know for sure how many groups, and what kind of groups, there are in our network, in what countries and cities. And beyond Women in Black, we know even less about all the other groups and activities of women opposing war.

The second question is - what's distinctive about our methodology, our approach? Is it different from mainstream antiwar activism? Third, what's our analysis, how do feminists understand the problem of militarism and war, and how much do we agree in this? Fourth, what are our strategies for peace – what do we think we're doing? And finally, fifth, how well connected are we, what are our communication needs?

I'll say a bit about all these five things. But I want to preface that by thinking a bit about globalization and global social movements.

At the back of my mind is a bigger question about globalization. I guess we need to be clear about how we're using this word. Often it's used just to mean the new global reach of corporate capital, empowered by neoliberal economic

policies of the powerful countries and the international institutions that they control, like the International Monetary Fund. The unimpeded global operation of capitalist finance, production and markets has brought dramatic changes in the exploitation of labour, and of nature, and of women, with growing inequalities, injustices and exclusions, and scary environmental disaster scenarios.

Globalization seen this way is destroying local economies and communities, creating deeper separation between the exploiters and the exploited, and homogenizing the world's varied cultures around the production and consumption of commodities the multinationals choose to generate. In this sense globalization is totally bad, and so people can talk about 'the *antiglobalization* movement' of progressive people who are opposing it.

But there's a broader and more inclusive way of using the word globalization which refers to the new potential for communication and contact on a global scale, due to rapid means of transport and electronic information technologies.

As women, as feminists, we use these things, too. And we often forget that our dependence on them is very problematic, because the Internet is nothing if it's not the child of corporate capital. Research and development on information and communication technologies is driven by military needs. Also, the obsolescence of its hardware is massively polluting. Maybe this is the fundamental contradiction for us and for other global social movements. We could discuss this later maybe, but look at the air miles I travel, and other women travel, to maintain contact and solidarity across national borders! And how dependent we all are on the Internet and cheap international phone calls.

The new global social movements involve new collective social actors organizing on a new scale. We need to organize globally because the threat is global. And I think it helps to recognize ourselves as 'new collective social actors' and to understand in what ways and why the old traditional political actor, the organized working class, has in a way failed us. The working class

capacity for self-organizing has been eroded, partly by globalization. But it was in fact never a very effective *international* movement. The class-based organized labour movement in strong economies was rhetorically in solidarity with labour in underdeveloped economies - but that solidarity was all the time undermined by the perception that competition from workers in those poor countries was reducing workers' wages in the rich ones.

Marxism hasn't been much use to us in understanding the new social actors. But analysts coming out of the Marxist tradition have started to acknowledge that the point of production isn't the only or even the main 'antagonism', as they used to call it. They've begun to theorize new alliances to contest power.

One of the new collective actors capable of generating a global movement is of course *women* – even the male theorists seem to have woken up to that – women thinking and acting *as women*, while at the same time questioning the category, using a gender analysis of power.

Social movements are difficult to define because you can't put boundaries round them. You need metaphors like gravity, pulls of attraction between certain themes and actors; or of flows, like currents in an ocean. The movement I'm interested in is in one sense a current within the global women's movement. In another sense it's a current in the worldwide movement against war. And part of the global justice movement, the environmental movement and so on.

We may not be able to put a boundary round it, but we *can* define a focus or cluster of foci. I'm choosing to define it as... the movement of women that's focused on violence against women in armed conflict, on enmity and reconciliation, on wars and their effects, and on militarism and militarization. We could call this "war etcetera" for short. But of course that selection of foci is arbitrary – because the movement continually flows into movements on – for instance – domestic violence, reproductive rights, human rights, and so on.

The reason for a particularly energetic part of the women's movement worldwide focusing on issues of war and peace is pretty obvious. The global reach of corporate capital is being underwritten by the projection of US (and allied) military power worldwide. Since 1989 (and in an astonishing display since September 11 2001) we've seen a growing readiness to use open force to enact this new imperialism. This coincides with a hugely increased technical capability to kill, and an alarming willingness to die in order to kill. Also, a lot of countries, destabilized by the collapse of the Soviet system and mandatory structural adjustment, and impoverished by unequal trade relations, have experienced, as Yugoslavia did, outbreaks of 'ethnicized' conflict on a big scale. All together, it's not surprising that among the several issues around which women are mobilizing is 'war etcetera'.

1) Mapping the movement.

In my research I'm supported by small grants from a number of charitable trusts concerned with peace. With their help, I'm travelling to countries where I know, or I'm told, that women are active in particular ways on these 'war etcetera' themes. I'm starting by contacting groups I know about, and allowing the local contacts to direct me outwards to others that I don't know about. So I'm finding that a lot of different kinds of social elements have to be imagined as being 'in' our movement.

Again we can't lay down definitions, but only give examples. We could start with the obvious – the movement includes women's networks that are international scope. An obvious place for me or you to begin is with Women in Black. It's an obvious candidate for this social movement we're trying to pin down: because it's a *feminist women's* network, it's got aspirations to be *global*, and it has a precise focus of *war*.

But WiB isn't the only world-spanning network of women dedicated to opposing war. A much older and highly respected one is Wilpf, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. It was founded in the middle of the First World War, so it's almost 90 years old, and it has branches in 40

different countries and it's taken seriously by the United Nations, where it maintains a permanent office. To achieve such things it's had to develop on less anarchic lines than WiB. It's had to bureaucratize. It has a head quarters in Geneva, an office at the United Nations, paid staff.

Another newer network is Code Pink, started since September 11 by Medea Benjamin, Starhawk and some other women in the USA. They depend on their website and e-mail list to model and disseminate a certain kind of action – first across the USA, increasingly in other countries. Code Pink are in total contrast to the serious, dignified, silent vigils of Women in Black, and equally far from the executive committees and presidential elections of Wilpf. Code Pink women and their male allies wear shocking-pink feather boas and have fun with street theatre and puppets. The three styles of Wilpf, WiB and Code Pink attract individuals with different aesthetics, and perhaps slightly different feminisms. They have different political uses too – they're good for different things.

But the global social movement of women opposed to war, if that's what we are, is far more than these purpose-designed world-wide networks. First, there are thousands of women's groups around the world, addressing one or other aspect of the overall problem in one locality: like say 'Women Act against Military Violence', in Okinawa, Japan. A lot of local groups like that aren't connected to others. As it happens that one is - it's a part of the really interesting alliance of women who call themselves the East Asia, US and Puerto Rico Women Against Militarism Network.

Secondly, there are women's *sections* or initiatives within a lot of mixed organizations – a good example would be the Women's Portal of IANSA, the International Action Network on Small Arms. There are women's organizations such as MADRE, whose main concern is human rights, that, as it happens, also do a lot on women and 'war etcetera'. There are women's initiatives that exist only as websites.

An important part of the network is more invisible. It's a kind of feminist *organism* (not an organization), sort of clusters of women who work together to analyze, monitor and lobby around a theme. You could think for instance of the women who concern themselves with UN Security Council Resolution 1325. The individuals and groups who drafted it and got it adopted, the ones who now chase up it's implementation. Some of these women are in UN agencies, like Unifem and the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations, others in NGOs like International Alert, others in universities. They know each other and share ideas and strategies, without being institutionally connected. That kind of web has to be seen as part of our movement.

There are a lot of feminist academics and journalists too, who help the movement by analysing and clarifying issues of peace and war. Women's conflict resolution initiatives too. These are part of the movement.

And finally, we shouldn't forget all those women who simply act individually, as women, against 'war etcetera'. The thousands of women that turn out for national demonstrations organized by Stop the War Coalition in the UK, the thousands log on to Indymedia. A woman may put her signature on a petition, put up a poster in her front window. She may teach her students, put forward motions to her trade union or party branch, phone the local radio station. Women like this must be considered part of the movement too. I think we have become a movement of many millions.

2) Shared methodologies.

Why do some women want to organize with women? I think there are basically two reasons. One has to do with how we understand war. The other is the way we want to proceed in opposing it.

It's easiest to look at the second first - ideas about methodologies of organization. Women's organizations pursue their opposition to war through a whole range of different strategies: street demos, non-violent direct action, lobbying and electoral politics, press and media work, travelling to conflict

zones, conciliation work, research, writing. But then, so do men do these things. But the women active in so many different ways seem to me to share, at least in outline, a certain preferred methodology for which, often after years of struggle, they have left the mainstream movements. We're looking for certain ways of relating and organizing that you can't rely on finding in the wider coalitions of men and women opposing war, particularly where they're dominated by certain parties and elements of the left. I don't know if that's the case here, but the women I've spoken with in a lot of countries say it's the case with them.

For a matter of argument you could summarize the components of a feminist methodology of antiwar action as four things. First of all, I sense that women tend to connect war very directly to women's own lives. A social movement it's sometimes said, '*controversializes power*' from the standpoint of the non-elite social actors. If you think about it, this is pretty characteristic of women's opposition to war and the war system: it doesn't derive so much from a political dogma or line, as from rage and despair at the way militarism and violent conflict distort and damage everyday life. That's so clear in Colombia for instance, where I was recently. There the war is a terrible three-way conflict between guerrillas, paramilitaries and government forces that makes ordinary villages and urban districts into battlefields. It's the demilitarization of everyday life that women are demanding there.

But it's not just in Colombia. The effect of women having been historically confined to 'the private' means they take it into the public with them when they go. The step that's made over and over again by every woman as she enacts this social movement of women against war is stepping across the threshold of home (whether that's a refugee camp in Sudan, an apartment in Tokyo, a house in Orpington, a shack in a South American *favela*) into the street and back again, forging a consciousness and ultimately a political identity out of a lived connection between everyday life and creative politics in the public sphere.

A second methodological thing I think we have in common is *principled non-violence*. Now this isn't as simple as it sounds. I *think* it means we are agreed on 'no exceptionalism', not saying 'But our particular war is a just war. After this one, peace'. It means we are as much as is humanly possible committed to non-violent ways of righting wrongs. (There are huge implications here – a responsibility to find effective means of defending people who are under attack, like Palestinians.) Some of the mainstream peace movement has this principle too. But for women the non-violence means verbal and relational as well as physical non-violence, and the mainstream doesn't always practice that.

A third feminist methodology is '*prefigurative*' *tactics* in which the 'means' don't betray the 'ends'. In other words, you shape your struggle to have the same form, spirit, relationships as the world you're struggling to bring into being. Which introduces an element of pleasure, inclusiveness and care.

And the fourth thing. I think our movement tends to identify *problems* rather than to identify *enemies*. For instance, we're always at pains to make it clear that doing things separately from men doesn't mean we see men as the enemy. Our Stop the War Coalition, which is a coalition led by the Socialist Worker Party, is all about hating: hating 'capitalists' or 'the USA' or 'the military'. I think the women's movement against war makes *enmity itself the problem*. Often women on demonstrations engage with individual soldiers, policemen and politicians, assuming their humanity.

3) Do we share an analysis?

So from what I've seen so far – and I've made study visits to Belgium, Turkey, Colombia, Spain and four cities in the USA – and now I'm here - I'm beginning to feel confident that the methodologies of protest in the women's global social movement against war etcetera are pretty clear and unifying. I'm not so sure about the analyses, the concepts.

So here I'd pose three questions. There are lots more of course.

First, and for instance, do we all make connections between *instances of war* and the underlying *ideology of militarism and structures of militarization*? Maybe we make the connection conceptually, but it doesn't always show up in our practices. For instance in the USA you'll find a lot of groups who are opposing the the invasion of Iraq but not necessarily or explicitly opposing the systematic projection of US military power around the globe. A lot of feminist groups address the Israeli destruction homes and lives in the West Bank and Gaza but not all of them at the same time challenge the US government's military and civilian aid and advice and diplomatic support to the Israeli Government. Some, but not all, organize to expose the involvement of US companies, like those who sell the Caterpillar armoured bulldozers with which the Israeli Defence Forces knock down Palestinian homes.

Secondly, I also wonder whether all our groups, or how many of us, not only make the conceptual link between *male use of violence to control women*, on the one hand, and on the other the *masculine cultures of war management and war fighting*. Well, perhaps we all make the link, the question is whether we make it explicit, act on it. It sounds obvious I know. But to express this connection isn't so easy, even for feminists. In London for instance we're deeply divided as to putting the M words – men, male, masculine - onto our placards. Some women see it as logical and necessary. Others are afraid it'll aggravate male passers-by and deflect from the 'important' issue: the government's war policies. The result is we don't do it.

I think the mainstream movement tends to analyse war as an *epiphenomenon* of the contemporary imperialist project involving the world domination of corporate capital. Fine, yes, this means the antiwar movement has to interlace intelligently with other global movements including the social and economic justice movement; and the environmental movement. But feminist theory gives us another thought: that war and militarization are instruments of power *predating* the growth of nation states and capitalism, intrinsically related to ages-old patriarchal systems of power, and thus are phenomena that must be

challenged as such, in their own right, with appropriate strategies. That means examining the historical development of patriarchal systems very carefully.

Taking the two thoughts together, the challenge is to conceptually connect militarism with the power relations of heterosexual sex, in the context of familial patriarchy, to bring to view the phallic nature of modern war just as of earlier wars.

Third... A manoeuvre that may or may not be part of our analysis, but isn't always part of our practice, is to make explicit the *link between racism and war* – racism seen as necessary to popularly legitimate war and war itself as productive of proper racist hierarchies. It's relatively easy to see racism in a country undergoing ethnic war, but less easy to connect racism in our own countries to our analysis of war. I remember going to Israel for a Sukkot event organized by Bat Shalom. The theme was 'racism'. I remember (so ignorant I am) thinking 'racism – why are they talking about *that* when there's the Occupation to talk about?' And of course I realized my mistake very quickly. Racism in Israel that situates Palestinian Arabs as aliens within Israeli state and society, as literally 'worth-less', precisely legitimates aggression against Palestinians the other side of the Green Line.

This linking of racism and war has got obvious implications for the alliances that women of different positionalities in relation to a given war will seek to forge, not only with women in other countries, but for instance with refugees, asylum seekers and minorities in our own countries. It also gives us a criterion with which to enter into the difficult debates feminists have about nationalism. We can ask: is a given nationalism, at a given time, challenging and dismantling old racist practices, or is it inventing new ones?

4) Strategies.

I'm finding women to be using a very wide range of strategies in different countries. To just list some of them:

- Street actions – vigils, street theatre;
- Non-violent direct action – picketing political sites, blockading military premises;
- Joining mass demonstrations;
- Information work – leafletting the public, teaching, speaking;
- Media work – press releases, articles, radio phone-ins;
- Investigation and research – about women in war, militarized masculinities, military policy, arms manufacture etc.;
- Support for those who refuse conscription to the military or disobey orders to fight;
- Campaigning – e.g. against landmines or the proliferation of small arms;
- Lobbying and pressuring the powerful and influential to achieve change of policy;
- Support of victims of war and of hostile immigration policies, in ways that highlight issues of injustice, militarism etc.;
- Academic research and writing, journalism;
- Peace education – in schools and elsewhere, counteracting military recruitment, working with boys and men on gendered violence;
- Networking – coordination action etc. locally and internationally to achieve specified ends;
- Solidarity work – especially those outside and inside conflict zones.

Some groups think through their choice of strategies carefully. Others among us act more on instinct or emotion. Some evaluate the effects more rigorously than others. There are gaps in our thinking. For instance, a lot of us work on a one-to-one basis: I put a leaflet in one person's hand, she reads it, it has an effect. But sometimes we do this without a very clear idea of how the motive for change gets transmitted from the individual holding the leaflet to the politicians who can change national policy. Some women feel we should do more research and thinking on this matter of strategy.

5) Communication.

I just want to end with some thoughts about communication in a global social movement like ours.

In social movements, representations, words, images and symbols are vitally important. The local movements act up, act out, on the street, at the military base. These actions have a local effect. But to have a wider impact, to clarify and communicate our purposes meaningfully to each other within the movement, to reach the unconvinced, to give us the momentum of a global social movement, there's no avoiding the fact that our actions have to be transformed into electronic words and images.

It's not only between, but also within, the elements of the movement that we need the Internet. To come back to Women in Black... We ask ourselves: can an amorphous creature like WiB, lots of little scattered groups without a linking structure, can we survive, grow and be effective? I get the sense that most women in Women in Black want it to stay spontaneous, without a 'line', without a structure – no committees, or presidents, or elections. But is there a danger we might disintegrate due to incoherence, unresolved differences, lack of conviction that what we believe is shared.

At the WiB annual encounter at Marina de Massa in Italy last August we recognized that the only way of steering between these hazards may be to invent more intelligent, more inclusive, processes of communication and decision-making using the Internet. And that's why a group of about 20 of us drawn from different countries were "volunteered" to get together as an electronic listserv (it's called 'wibcomm') to discuss how to carry those processes forward, to implement some improvements and report back on longer term strategy to the next international encounter in 2005.

WiB have no choice but to stay on-line because it's the only practical means of communication we have – as an international network it practically defines us. And here we add to the basic contradiction of the capitalist Internet a lot of

practical problems. We lack the technical and social skills, and we lack the money to buy them. We're afraid of the disasters other organizations have encountered: working by e-mail can drown us in information, it can create new exclusions, amplify existing inequalities, and precipitate drastic misunderstandings. Just as bureaucracies do, and just as the so-called 'tyranny of structurelessness' does, electronic organizing invites power play.

So I end these sketchy thoughts with a very practical question: how are we going to achieve the coherent, productive, inclusive, democratic communication that a global social movement needs? Even in Women in Black, alone, we need to ask ourselves – do we or do we not need for instance to take decisions, agree texts and coordinate synchronized worldwide actions? Maybe we dont and shouldnt attempt it. If we do, can we achieve it in a way that's not arbitrary, and not undemocratic? Can we learn to handle global electronic communication, can we learn to enact a global social movement, in a feminist way?

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