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Campaigning in 2006:
Do We Still Need Women's Organizations?

There's nothing new about 'women as women' protesting against war and organizing for peace. Two thousand four hundred years ago Aristophanes wrote a play, *Lysistrata*, in which he imagined women of Sparta and Athens going on strike – refusing to have sex with their husbands – to bring an end to the 27-year war between the two city states that had become a way of life for the men.

A hundred and sixty-five years ago, it was the late 1840s, in Britain, at least three thousand women around the country were organized in 150 women's peace groups called "Olive Leaf Circles".

Ninety-one years ago, one year into the First World War (as WILPF women know very well because it was our founding moment), one thousand five hundred women from the belligerent countries, including the US, Britain, Germany, Austria, travelled through war zones to the Hague in neutral Netherlands to discuss how to end it.

And 24 years ago, on December 12th 1982, around 35,000 women (lots of you, I bet, and me too, among them) assembled at the Royal Air Force Base at Greenham Common in protest against the siting of US cruise and Pershing missiles in Britain. In an action called 'Embrace the Base' we joined hands all the way round its nine-mile fence.

So you could almost answer the question "why do we still need women's organizations?" by saying simply "to honour our past, the women who created this movement before us".

But there are other reasons. I'll try to say what I think they may be. With less than half an hour I'll have to be very disciplined and brief. I'll pick out three. But in discussion I know you'll add more reasons – or raise some doubts and questions about these.

And let me say at the outset, that none of these reasons need be taken as meaning that as women we reject individual men or give them less than the respect each one merits. I'll come back to that later.

1. The first reason I'd pick out for women organizing as women is: women's experiences in life and war, and women's learned and chosen skills and abilities as war survivors, are gender-specific. That's to say, we share some of them with men, but some are peculiarly ours. And our experiences often go un-remarked, and our abilities are often under-

valued. *We* are the ones most inclined to re-state them, acknowledge and respect them.

A small proportion of women serve in war as soldiers – in this they share something with men, although their experience as women-soldiers will never be identical with men's. A far greater number of women experience war as 'civilians', that mass of ordinary people who are more and more the principal casualties. Women in their young and middle years unavoidably have responsibility, even more in war than in peace, for the elderly and the children of both sexes. They are the ones who struggle to maintain everyday life, in devastated homes, in migrant shanty towns, or in refugee camps.

Or in Yarlswood Detention Centre in Bedfordshire, where last month I had the privilege to meet a woman from the Congo (DRC), who for five months has been trying to make that prison behind razor-wire into home for her 19-month old daughter, while under threat of deportation to face again the death she narrowly escaped from.

Women are peculiarly vulnerable in war because of the predatory way men and armies regard their bodies and sexuality. As Colombian women put it, women are *botín de guerra*, booty of war. Some are seen as the property of one 'side' in the conflict – in Colombia you may be seen as a woman 'of the paramilitaries' or 'of the guerrilla'. 'Your' men can be humiliated and punished through your rape. Or you are simply seen as available for any man's use and disposal.

When the world does notice women's vulnerabilities, it's often to exploit them: as in sensational headlines about rape, or in justifying war against Islamic countries as being about 'liberating' women.

Organizing as women, we can give our full attention to these experiences and state them clearly to each other, to the wider movements we're part of, and our governments and international agencies.

I mentioned women's chosen and learned skills and capabilities. Women are often the quickest to resume contact with the 'enemy' side. The Croatian town of Gornji Vakuf was split down its main road into Muslim and Croat sides as Bosnian society was torn to pieces by extreme nationalists in 1993 and 4 . A year after the ceasefire the respective gangs of armed men were still maintaining a line of separation through the town. Nobody dared to cross it. Until two women, Nermina, so-called Muslim, and Pavka, so-called Croat, old friends, decided to rediscover each other and the two of them set up a women's centre right on the front line.

Women are often the ones pressing for ceasefires and guarding the peace. It was Liberian, Sierra Leonean and Guinean women of Marwopnet, the Mano River Women's Peace Network that flew between Monrovia, Freetown and Lomé, demanding interviews with their state presidents, telling these important men "talk, now". It's women like Yasmin Yusu-Sherriff and Nana Pratt and Rosaline M'Carthy of Marwopnet that, now the fighting has stopped,

trek to the furthest reaches of Sierra Leone to organize local women into an early warning system, to report on any movement of men, drugs and weapons across the border, to protect against any resumption of that atrocious war.

You could say that the UN Security Council in resolution 1325 has now recognized these woman-specific experiences and capabilities. And that's true. But it was precisely a long, slow, huge movement of women that achieved it. The mobilization began with women attending the UN world conferences of women, the hundreds of women who gathered in the 'peace tents' at Nairobi and Beijing. It was picked up by women in international NGOs, including WILPF, who pressed it on some feminists in the UN departments, and others in government missions in New York. And we could think of the lone woman member of the Security Council, Ambassador Patricia Durrant of Jamaica was there during the crucial debate on October 24 2000. Her dignified presence made absolutely impossible any sneering or belittlement of women's issues by the men of that very masculine and authoritative body.

In the NGO Working Group that lobbied for 1325 and now works hard for its implementation, WILPF, which played a key role, and the Hague Appeal for Peace, were the only ones whose reason for existence was opposition to militarism. And WILPF was the only one that actually named itself feminist. In my view that combination was the real winner – and it's a powerful precedent for women organizing as women against war.

When the world notices women doing work for peace they often 'naturalize' it and say 'men have always made war, women are born peacemakers'. That is a stereotyping that reduces women to our bodies (again). But worse it's a fatalism that makes the continuation of war seem inevitable.

Women organizing as women can make clear that when women demonstrate skills of conciliation it's because they've learned them, often at great cost. And when women work for peace it's a political choice.

2. A second reason for organizing as women in women's organizations is that it's always valuable to create a few women's spaces in a world overwhelmingly shaped by men, and in social movements in which men's voices command most attention.

It's axiomatic that in mixed organizations men, through their numbers, their habituated expectations and their style of behaviour, make it difficult for women to contribute their skills of leadership. Time and again in the 80,000 miles I've travelled in the last two years I've met women (women in Italy, in Spain, in India, you name it), who've said: 'the mixed movement never give us space on the platform'. They also say the style of the left-led movements against war are alienating to them – the brutality of the imagery (lynching Blair and Bush), the emphasis on enmity (anti-US rhetoric), the mass-produced and repetitive yelled slogans.

Often the big alliances like Stop the War Coalition here, or United for Peace and Justice in the US, involve dubious and incautious partnerships. We've all been on rallies where as women we felt uncomfortable alongside religious fundamentalist groups who, we know full well, in other contexts want to stifle women's self-expression. And I remember being on a march against the bombing of Belgrade in 1999. We were Women in Black, opposing both ethnic cleansing and the NATO bombing. On that left-led demonstration, we found ourselves alongside Serb nationalists promoting Milosevic. The first speaker in Trafalgar Square who criticized the Serb nationalist regime *as well as* criticizing NATO, was shouted down. The organizers did nothing to assert our right to be against both kinds of aggression.

By creating women's spaces in the movement we're able to work more carefully and intelligently on our agendas. We can be more wholistic – hang onto a respect for women and for difference, respect for 'others', even supposed 'enemy' others, seeing that as intrinsic to our aim of ending war.

We can build meaningful, not merely rhetorical, alliances – as in the working partnership I'm so proud of today between WILPF, Women in Black, the Iraqi women of Act Together, and Women Living Under Muslim Laws, Code Pink and other like-minded groups, learning from each other.

We can choose a prefigurative non-violence in our activism, our gestures and our words. By prefigurative I mean what the Spanish call 'coherencia entre fines y medios' - I've learned a lot about it from Spanish women - giving your activism the quality of the world you're striving to achieve.

Women's methodologies of resistance aren't passive. Women are creative in their use of symbolism. Sewing a quilt for instance to symbolize multiplicity and connectedness. The women of the East Asia – US – Puerto Rico Network of Women against Militarism come from Japan, South Korea, Hawaii, the Philippines, the USA and Puerto Rico. They run a well-informed and tough-minded campaign against US military manipulation of politics in their countries and the damaging presence of US bases in their region. They struggle with military prostitution and contamination of their lands by heavy metal toxins. But what I remember most about our week of meetings in Manila is the colourful rituals – South Korean women making costumes of coloured paper, inviting us to join them with their bells and candles. We dressed the trees with messages of peace.

Another method women often choose silence, a positive silence. The women who stand every Wednesday on the steps of the Public Library in New York protesting against Bush's 'war on terror' say:

> Our silence is visible…We're silent because mere words can't express the tragedy that wars and hatred bring. We refuse to add to the cacophony of empty statements that are spoken with the best intentions yet may be erased or go unheard under the sound of a passing ambulance or a bomb exploding nearby.

One of them is Julie Finch. She used to be a dancer, now she's an actor. She knows from experience that silence can move and touch people. She says:

> Our silence means, 'we're not here to argue or debate. This is how we feel. This is our witness. This is like a beginning of healing. This is non-violent action. This is mediation. Listen to us (if you want to)'.

I think the methods women's organizations exemplify are useful in drawing more people into antimilitarist activism than might otherwise be the case. Some of us are lucky - but so many women's lives are a struggle with men – to be heard, to be respected and valued. To feel equal and safe. I remember learning from Joanna Vance – she ran the "Women into Politics" project in Belfast - how simply walking through the door of a women's community association, a safe women's space in that warring working class city, could turn out to be a route to political self-expression for women whose lives till then had told them 'politics, like the gun, is for men'.

3. But now to the third reason I would stress for women organizing as women against war. Women have a unique theory to guide our practice. It's called feminism.

I was at a meeting once of international relations theorists. IR is a very manly world, they deal with things like states and war, sovereignty and deterrence. On this occasion Gillian Youngs had brought some thinkers in this discipline together to discuss producing a possible feminist edition of an international relations academic journal. One of them said, 'the trouble with feminists is they have no theory of war'. For a moment it threw me. But later I thought about it. Of course. Feminism is basically a theory of gender as a relation of power. That *of itself* is a theory of war.

I think it goes something like this… Mainstream theories of armed conflict look for its causes in such things as imperialism and resistance, national rights, capitalist expansionism, competition for resources, the clash of civilizations, conflicting ideologies, and so on. Feminism also sees those things as at the root of war, but adds an understanding of power that cuts horizontally across all of them, amplifies them, puts flesh on them, makes them more explanatory. It states that a *perennial and universal dimension of power is gender power. Difference between men and women is expressed as dominance. Gender relations are among the causes of militarism and war. In particular there's a connection between masculinities and war.*

Even though it's still not comfortable to say this, it isn't a new thought. Just over two centuries ago Mary Wollstonecraft wrote "Every military corps is a chain of male despots, crawling for rank and power." She believed militarism threatens women in particular by reinforcing masculine habits of authority.

In 1938, sixty-eight years ago, Virginia Woolf wrote a polemic against patriarchy and its predilliction for nationalism and war. "Scarcely a human being in the course of history," she wrote, "has fallen to a woman's rifle; the vast majority of birds and beasts have been killed by you, not by

us…Obviously there is for you some glory, some necessity, some satisfaction in fighting which we have never felt or enjoyed."

But to get beyond the polemic, to see the matter in perspective, I think it helps to go back in time – a long way back. All societies, from the beginning of settled agricultural life in the late neolithic period, are characterized by a social differentiation of human beings along three important dimensions:

- differences of property and wealth – we might call it class;
- differences of tribe or race – today we might call it ethnicity;
- and differences based on sex and reproduction – we call it gender.

Archeological and historical research has taught us about the early civilizations of the eastern Mediterranean, in the fourth and fifth millennium before the Christian era, where it's possible to see these differentiations gradually becoming significant and institutionalized differences of power. As agriculture began to produce surpluses, wealth was accumulated more and more at the cost of others' labour power and those others had to be coerced. Additional and more controllable labour was acquired through raiding and warfare, enslaving neighbouring peoples. But the first appropriated labour – in terms of work, sexual services and reproduction, in the institution of the family and that of slavery - was that of women, who came to be considered as men's property.

(I'm not going to say anything here about feminist theories that the early neolithic and paleolithic had been societies in which women had more authority and respect. Those books are a great read. I hope they're true!)

So these differentiations, differences that were converted into imbalances of power, hierarchies of class and 'race' and gender are not just the invention of sociologists in the 1960s. And their 'intersectionality' as it's now called, isn't just a postmodern notion of the 1990s. These dimensions of power were intimately related from the earliest times. Their medium was violence – interpersonal violence, structural violence, inter-state warfare. Doesn't it make absolute sense that WILPF today doesn't limit its focus to war, but includes economic injustice and poverty on the one hand, and racism on the other?

To take a swift leap to more recent history. War has persisted, its technologies developing with the centuries. Class relations persist – though the wealthy classes are now less aristocratic than capitalist. The dividing lines of race or culture are still markers for hatred. Today they persist as a hierarchy of nation states, and inside them as relatively powerful majorities and powerless minorities. Patriarchy has persisted, it's surprisingly resilient, but in new forms. Well, old forms too. Did anyone see that photograph on the Guardian Eye Witness double-spread in September last year? It was a group photograph of 159 presidents, prime ministers kings and princes at a world summit of the United Nations. Among the massed ranks of men, if you looked very carefully you could pick out eight women. Stunning. Not that the Guardian commented on the gender dimension of the photo – that was taken for granted.

If you took a photo of the 159 most powerful people in the capitalist corporations the outnumbering of women by men would be the same or greater. But the point is never really numbers. The point is relations and processes.

Patriarchy is a social system, a structure and also an ideology. Its reproduction from year to year and age to age is achieved through cultural processes. Consciously masculine cultures, cultures in which manhood is shaped in particular forms by men in interaction with each other, are the engine of patriarchy. Vital to patriarchy are cultures in which each generation of men learns to be authoritative and combative, each generation of women learns to be self-effacing, to put men and responsibility for others before themselves. The clamour of the boys' school playground. The banter of pub and club. Pornography. The army barracks. Sport – take football fan clubs. (I've just read a serious book by James McBride about the relationship between sport, violence and war. It has the shocking title "War, battering and other sports: the gulf between American men and women"!)

Oh yes, and lets not forget the culture that thrives in the offices and laboratories of the intellectuals and scientists that develop nuclear weapons and nuclear strategies. Carol Cohn has made a stunning study as a participant observer in such a place. She worked with them. She had to learn the language. And she's written about how nuke-speak is man-speak, even lad-speak. How megatons of explosive are explicitly equated with masculine potency, how non-proliferation treaties are for wimps.

These are some of the various and many places in which war is daily made thinkable and do-able. They are cultures that legitimate violence in boys and men, devaluing the feminine and women. With the rise of an oppositional culture of human rights, and women's rights, this has become an embarrassment in some quarters. But it persists as overwhelmingly the prevalent schema.

Patriarchy and its masculine cultures are a good source of support for nationalism – because cogent national identities that can outface rival nations are characterized by strong gutsy patriotic men - and women who are loyal to them. Patriarchy is also a mainstay of militarism, which has a bottomless appetite for manly leaders and a rank-and-file of men who've been brought up to respect their authority and know that it's honourable to kill and die for one's country.

This is why some women prefer to separate themselves from men – with whom they are intimately connected in most phases and spheres of everyday life – when organizing against war and indeed on other issues where gender - relations are involved. We need, some of us, to stand back and feel free to question the connection between violence and today's gender cultures and a too-long-lived system of male dominance. Where else and how else can we generate a women's counter-culture, a rebellious and disloyal femininity that refuses to be the 'better half' of the conventional gender dyad?

So I've suggested three reasons for the continuance of women's organizations for peace and justice, like Wilpf. Women's different experiences and competences in war and the need for recognizing and voicing them. Having autonomy as women over choosing our methodologies of protest. And finally understanding, using and developing our feminist theories of gender and war.

Some women, though, are suspicious of the apparent 'separatism' implied in women-only organizing.

If you have time to visit my weblog (it's just my name and then 'dot org') you'll find a debate going on between women and men about whether and why include men in women's organizations. You can join in and post a comment if you feel like it. The main argument for including men is "why separate people on grounds of gender – it's so invidious - that's just what the system does!". I respect the arguments on both sides actually. I think we should be ready to find that some women have their reasons for wanting men alongside – a lot of Women in Black vigils for instance are happy to have a few men stand with them. Some WILPF groups I believe have husbands and friends as supportive members. There may be something to be said for learning how to have women-led organizations with men in them – it's a kind of novelty.

But I believe at the same time that the wish of some women to organize separately *must* be respected by both women and men. It doesn't mean a rejection of men. We could rather see it as giving men permission to form their own groups in which to study gender relations, do the consciousness-raising so many women have done, to weigh carefully the implication of masculinity in violence, and work for change in gender power relations *at the very same time as they work for peace*.

Because I'm as sure as I am of anything that war won't end till gender relations are transformed. It's not a sufficient condition – economic exploitation and racial hatred have to be addressed too – but it is a necessary condition. We won't have peace without it.

Cynthia Cockburn
Department of Sociology
City University London.
c.cockburn@ktown.demon.co.uk

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