

Women and wars: some trajectories towards a feminist peace

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Women as revolutionaries and combatants: the Islamic experience

When analysing the role of gender in conflict, the first myth that needs to be exploded is that of the absence of women from the battleground. It is too simplistic to assume that it is in the nature of men and women to be situated in the public and private arenas, respectively, and that it is in the essence of their beings that men become associated with wars, revolutions, and rebellions, while women become associated with peace. In addition to the flourishing feminist literature that argues against such assumptions, in the context of Islam and the Middle East, history empirically counters such views. Throughout the ages, women have been active participants in wars, not only as camp followers, carers, and providers, but also as combatants.

The recorded participation of women in wars preceded Islam and became central to Islamic politics at the time of the Prophet some 14 centuries ago; and both the majority Sunni Muslims and the minority Shiias have historical memories of female warriors. The Prophet was accompanied by women in the wars that he waged, and after his death his youngest and cherished wife Ayisha took to the battlefields heading an army against the Shiia *imam* Ali. Though she was defeated, Ayisha's experience both as warrior and as king maker has been central to the history of Islam. After the death of the Prophet, it was Ayisha who decided that caliphs should be selected by consensus (*ijma*), rather than by descent. She facilitated the choice of first her father and subsequently Omar and Othman as caliphs. When eventually the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law was selected as the fourth caliph, Ayisha raised an army and went into battle against him.

Muslim women have continued to participate in wars and struggles across the centuries. To take Iran as an example, there has been both a long history of women's participation in protests, revolutions, and rebellion, and often a close association between their actions and those of the religious establishment. It may be argued that revolutions can demonstrate that they have real and extensive popular support when the women take to the streets. In the case of Iran, back in the late nineteenth century, veiled women led riots demanding cheaper bread. Their presence convinced the Qajar king that he needed to respond positively to that demand. Similarly, women played an important role in the tobacco revolution of 1881. The Qajar king Nasseredin shah granted a tobacco monopoly to a British company to control the industry from the point of production to consumption. The handing over of such a lucrative industry to a foreign company met with intense opposition among the merchant classes and their close allies in the religious establishment. As a result, the eminent Shiia leader Haj Mirza Hassan Shirazi issued a *fatwa*, or religious order, banning the use of tobacco. The entire nation obeyed. Women of all classes, including the royal entourage, felt so outraged that they broke their water pipes and gave up smoking. When the Shah smoked a water pipe (*qualyan*), in the presence of his favourite wives and ordered them to follow his example, they refused pointing out that they would not touch alcoholic drinks because it was forbidden by Islam: 'Right now tobacco has been forbidden by the senior religious leader. It cannot be made licit for us by the monarch's command' (Ravandi 1336:719). The king revoked the tobacco concession.

In 1906, veiled women mobbed the royal carriage, demanding that the king pay attention to the demands of the religious leaders who were leading the constitutional movement. There were even some redoubtable tribal women who took up arms against the king's forces and beat them in battle. Later in the century, Iranian women continued to play their part in the military occupation that ravaged the country during the Second World War and were active in the subsequent revolutions of 1953 and 1979. In 1979, the presence of veiled women by the millions in anti-shah demonstrations spelt the downfall of the Pahlavi rule in Iran.

Even in the post-revolutionary period and under the Islamification laws, during the war against Iraq women served as nurses, cooks, and washerwomen behind the front lines. But the feminine nature of their tasks contributed to the enduring wartime picture of 'man does, woman is'.

Women warriors

Universally, women have participated in the wars and revolutions embroiling their homelands. Their contributions have ranged from providing practical support for the combatants to being used as important symbols of nationhood and motherhood, to becoming embattled courageously and fighting alongside men. They have done so in Latin America, Southeast Asia, Africa, and elsewhere. Women were freedom-fighters in Nicaragua, Vietnam, and in South Africa, where they were trained and fought along with men in the ANC forces. The ANC offered the same military training for men and women. Women and men slept in separate barracks but the women wore the same uniforms, attended the same physical fitness, engineering, and map-reading courses, and did the same chores and daily routines as the men. In Vietnam and among the rebel factions of Southern Sudan, women were also active combatants. They furnished much of the infrastructure of resistance, acted as couriers, and provided intelligence and refuge.

In times of war, gender barriers were diluted. Where they were active combatants, women's participation often helped during the time of war to create a sense of equality and erase gender differences. Sometimes individual women have even been propelled into positions of authority. But those were the exceptions. All too often in the post-war era women have found it harder to maintain their positions. This may in part be because their participation was always seen as marginal; they were 'helpers' and not policy makers or frontline combatants. Women who enlisted to serve with the conventional armed forces, as in the South African SADF or in the Israeli army, for example, remained subservient to men and were employed in feminised tasks and medical and civilian ranks. In some cases, as that of Iran during the eight-year war with Iraq, the presence of armed women at the front line and in army processions was merely a propaganda ploy. Though much photographed on parades, women covered in the full-length *chador* veil never took part in active combat. Thus it can be argued that, on the whole, whether real or symbolic, the presence of women in the formal and informal armed forces has not fundamentally changed their social position (Abdel Halim 1998; Cock 1992).

However, even when women are not present in direct combat, they continue to play important roles in supporting the cause. Usually they

have been operating within their traditional frameworks providing the men with vital support and back-up. In Palestine, women belonging to Amal and the Islamist Hizbollah seem to have been liberated by the war. They have shed their invisible domestic role to participate actively in the public sphere, albeit veiled and segregated. They smuggled food, kept watch and, when necessary, created diversions so that the men could get away. They did not join the military, but they were and remain an integral part of the resistance movement. Similarly, Vietnamese women were viewed as an asset to their men. They cultivated the fields while the men went to war, provided food and support, carried medicine, served as air-raid wardens in the north, and fought along the men in the south (Taylor 1999:125).

War and femininity

In their long struggle against apartheid, some ANC and South African guerrilla women chose to be both lovers and fighters. But they did so against the prevailing opinions and had to defend their position by arguing that such relationships did not 'weaken' them, even though it 'softened' them (Cock 1992:152). This exercise in the niceties of terminology is indicative of the problems that women experience when they try to combine their roles as carers and warriors.

The sense of masculinity which is anchored in the very conception of wars and revolutions remains almost uncontested. A change in the role of men from breadwinners to combatants entitles them to more rights. But femininity sits uncomfortably with wars and conflicts. The change of the role of the woman from a housewife to a combatant is without clear precedence and has taken differing trajectories in different contexts. The move may provide a path towards equality but it can also cause a further decline in a woman's status. Those few women who achieve a position of leadership often feel very vulnerable. They find it necessary to prove their commitment and valour all the time (Cock 1992:162). This may explain why, while the Iranian resistance leader Rajavi could leave to work in exile, his wife, Khiabani, was the partner who stayed behind to continue the fight to the death. But for those women who survive, once they have been identified as 'strong women', it becomes difficult for them also to acknowledge having a heart (Atwan 1993); the masculine stereotype of battles works to deprive women of all vestige of femininity.

Yet many women do not wish to abandon femininity. Even warrior women sometimes tire of the uniformly male attires that denote their

military rank by denying their femininity. Sometimes women who have lived with and dressed like their male counterparts find it liberating to regain their femininity. But even among revolutionaries, when such women wear short skirts and feminine clothes, they find that their brethren in arms may revert to type and begin whistling and cat-calling (Cock 1992:152). There are times when women find their traditional clothes useful as a protection. Muslim women have used their all-enveloping veils to secure their anonymity and also to hide the arms and ammunition that they carry for the fighters. They did so in Iran in the course of the 1906 and 1979 revolutions and in the post-revolutionary struggles in the 1980s, and they did it as well during the civil war in Algeria and in other Muslim countries. The redoubtable South African woman Thandi Modise has been called 'the knitting needles guerrilla' because, while she was operating underground as an Umkhonto we Sizwe guerrilla, she tried to look as ordinary as possible and carried a handbag from which protruded a pair of knitting needles (Cock 1992:149).

Front and back

A further myth that needs exploding is that of valiant men at the battlefield defending the honour of their wives and protecting the family back home. Increasingly, wars are fought on the home fronts. In Iraq, it was marketplaces and bridges that were bombed, as well as underground refuges in which women and children would hide to protect themselves from the bombardment of the cities. In Afghanistan, it is the towns once again that are bombed and the women and children that trail across mountains and borders to reach refugee camps, where invariably they live in abominable conditions.

The invisibility of women's participation in wars and revolutions, their unacknowledged, low-profile contributions to the protection of the combatants, and their hidden complicity in the construction of the fighting forces have all helped to uphold the myth of the silent cowardly woman in need of protection from male warriors. Were the details of women's activities more broadly known, it would become more difficult to maintain these kinds of stereotypes (Turshen 1998:1).

Militarism is disenfranchising; it is politically as well as economically and physically debilitating. In militarised zones and during civil wars, violence becomes a crisis of everyday life, especially when 'dirty war' strategies are used by different factions contending for power

(Nordstrom 1992:261). It becomes difficult, if not impossible, to separate combat from non-combat, and the frontguard and rearguard are not clear-cut, either. Most women in such situations experience violence as a matter of daily life and devise strategies to cope with it. To live under military occupation is to live in a permanent state of war with no place to hide and no ceasefires.

When nations live under military occupation, be it by foreign or by coercive internal forces, the traditional divides between feminine and masculine roles and spaces are blurred. During the *intifada* uprising in Palestine, for example, women confronted Israeli soldiers in their homes and neighbourhoods more often than men did during the day: 'Usually soldiers come each day in the morning ... this is the usual routine: the soldiers come, enter some houses without knocking and take the men and boys away' ('Adi 1993:124).

The attacks and destruction of camps and villages in the 2002 Israeli invasion have further obliterated any notion of divide between home and war fronts or any gender divide in terms of death and destruction. Rita Giacaman, Professor of Public Health at Birzeit University, reported 'rampant' stealing of people's belongings and valuables and the stealing of food from stores by the army as a matter of everyday experience (reported in her e-mails of 11 and 15 April 2002, among many more). Homes became mass graves (*Guardian* 16 April 2002). At such times and in such battles, men, women, and children can be labelled as 'terrorists' and murdered indiscriminately. Children as young as four years of age were accused of terrorism and murdered with impunity (interview with an Israeli squadron leader on the BBC Radio Four 'Today' programme 16 April 2002).

Once the distinction between the home and the battlefield has been eliminated, it is not surprising that the armed forces should lose sight of boundaries: not only do the homes become the targets of invaders but also sexuality becomes the domain of power struggles. Rape is used to rip apart the fabric of society not only by undermining women but also their men. Male soldiers invade homes, attack women physically and sexually, and force themselves on women who had until then lived a private life. Women who are taken prisoner are humiliated physically and emotionally. Male interrogators use concepts of shame and honour when questioning women prisoners and do not stop at words. Honour and shame become central to the lives of women prisoners. The divide between masculinity and femininity remains crucial, particularly in terms of these concepts. Women who are

arrested and refuse to be broken down by their prison interrogators may be raped or assumed to have been raped.

There are, for instance, extensive reports of Iranian prison warders raping virgin girls in order to make sure that they would not be allowed in heaven after their execution (Goldbatt and Meintjes 1998). Palestinian women resistance fighters were often not welcomed back to their communities, even if they had not been sexually violated by their interrogators. Women trapped in these and other situations of conflict have often found that, once freed from prison, it is difficult, if not impossible, for them to regain their honoured positions within the family. Many are, or are accused of being, pregnant with illegitimate children (Mayer 1994:78).

Marriage

One of the practical problems imposed on women by the prevalence of value systems grounded on honour and shame is the impossibility of women activists and combatants to return to normality. Since often they are seen as having been tarnished either physically or emotionally, they become 'un-marriageable' in societies where marriage is the norm.

Moreover, the sexual vulnerability of women is not confined to the activities of invading forces. Among combatants, too, the relationships between men and women can be difficult. Sudanese women fighters found themselves subjected to forced marriage and rape (Abdel Halim 1998:96). Iranian women working with the resistance movements were more or less compelled to marry their comrades in order to make them respectable and enable them to work alongside men. In fact, the only possible path to women's rising up the ranks of the Iranian resistance fighters was through marriage. When Ashraf Khiabani, the wife of Massoud Rajavi and leader of the Islamic *Mujahidin* forces in Iran, was killed in a street battle, he married Maryam, the wife of his second in command. Maryam divorced her husband, married the leader, and subsequently displaced him as the leader of the *Mujahidin* in exile. But she could not have done so without the formality and protection of marriage. Nicaraguan women fighters got married informally while under arms, but at the end of the Sandinista revolution found it difficult to re-integrate into their society. Some South African women guerrillas chose to marry and have children at the same time as they engaged in the resistance movement, arguing that marriage and children were necessities, not luxuries, and that they deepened the commitment of the combatants.

At times of war and crisis, the role of women is to give solace to soldiers by marrying them, or in some cases by comforting them in the euphemistically named 'rest and recreation zones'. Those who marry must give solace to the nation by giving birth to sons and demonstrating the need for further combat by shadowing the coffins of those killed in combat.

But marriage has also been designated a place where women are expected to perform their duties as carers and providers. In war, they become carers of the sick, wounded, and disabled men who can no longer fight, and the providers of future warriors. During the eight-year war against Iraq, the Iranian state was offering widowed and single women a small dowry and a great deal of encouragement to marry disabled and wounded soldiers, thus freeing the state of its obligation to care for its heroes.

Motherhood

Perhaps the most difficult demands placed upon women at times of war regard motherhood. Warring states and revolutionary leaders adopt a language that reifies motherhood and defines a woman's worth in terms of her ability to have children. For example, the Iranian religious leader Khomeini, like Hitler and Mussolini before him, considered motherhood to be a full-time occupation rooted in the core of the family. Khomeini instructed women to return to their homes and concentrate on being good teachers 'in the family'. He advised them most strongly to avoid cluttering their minds with 'unnecessary' subjects taught in the formal educational institutions. The Germans limited female enrolment in the universities to 10 per cent, Mussolini and Khomeini barred women from studying technical subjects, and Khomeini expelled all female law students. Like Hitler in 1936, Khomeini in 1979 sacked all women judges and made the law the exclusive domain of men. Thus, though a powerful and evocative symbol, motherhood was defined in these contexts as the unavoidable destiny as well as the national duty of women.

Women in post-revolutionary Iran were to be 'elevated' to the honourable task of motherhood. They were to become the pillars of society by being 'strong forts of virtue and chastity' and by 'raising brave and enlightened men and meek and united women'. Such praise of motherhood echoed Hitler's statement that entrusted women with the life of the nation by making them responsible for caring for the body and mind of their men. So strong was the call for

women to espouse motherhood that some national papers in Iran began referring to young women as 'future mothers of the children of the revolution'. Hitler in *Mein Kampf* makes a similar assertion, contending that young women achieve full citizenship only when they marry and particularly when they bear children to maintain and perpetuate the Arian race. Similarly, Khomeini felt that mothers should be the cornerstone of the nation's future by raising 'brave men in the laps'.

But it is not only fascists, Christians, or Muslims who place motherhood as the central contribution of women to war efforts. In Israel, Geula Cohen, founder of the extreme-right Tehiya Party, reminded women that it was in their 'nature' and their 'reserve duty' to be 'a wife of a soldier, a sister of a soldier, a grandmother of a soldier' (Hazleton 1977:63).

Thus motherhood, which in peacetime is often a natural progression and a happy event, becomes a burdensome duty during a crisis, and even the forerunner of death and devastation. Women fighting at the front feel the need to justify having children. Women who are left behind are expected to give birth to sons and to future warriors and to sacrifice those very sons to the cause. They become the guardians of cradles and coffins. Motherhood, the unpaid job of women at home, is rewarded by the death of their children. Thus, mothers universally become the symbol of sorrow and suffering, and children the cause for sacrifice. Some warrior women adopt the same language as men in singling out motherhood as such an emblem. The South African guerrilla fighter Ruth Mompoti, who had given her whole life to the struggle, said that she has 'done it for our children' to create a better life for them (Cock 1992:178).

Some women fighters, however, have seen motherhood as a celebration of their femininity and as the humanising aspect of their lives. Jacqueline Molefe, a leading member of the Umkhonto we Sizwe guerrilla movement in Southern Africa, was proud to say that, in addition to being a soldier, she was the mother of two little girls who had 'introduced something new' in her life (Cock 1992:162). The well-known fighter Thandi Modise felt that giving birth enabled her to keep hold of reality, of pure and absolute love, and of the reasons why she was fighting. In her view, it was important for fighters also to understand the emotions and experience the love of parenting (Cock 1992:152). But in the battle between femininity and war many women had to abandon their children and fight.

Martyrdom

Celebration of death and martyrdom becomes the hallmark of suffering and achievement for women across cultural and national divides. In Israel and Palestine, as in Iran during the war with Iraq, funerals are major political occasions where it is women and their suffering that are paraded as justification for further wars and further grief.

In Iran, public funerals were central from the inception of the 1979 revolution, which orchestrated a recurring theme of public mourning ceremonies held at 40-day intervals to remember those gunned down by the shah's soldiers. These mourning marches began in the holy city of Qum and spread throughout the main urban centres and finally led to public demonstrations of over two million people in Tehran. Thus, it can be argued that the Iranian revolution was anchored in the ceremony of death and mourning. The massive presence of women, veiled in the traditional black *chador* (veil), played an important symbolic role in affirming not only their support for the cause, but also the willingness of the nation's homes and hearths to move out of their allotted domestic sphere and give public backing to the Islamic revolution.

However, it was during the war with Iraq that this powerful symbolism was played to its fullest. As more and more men were called to the front and killed, ever greater importance was given to motherhood both as a symbol of resistance and of heroism. Public funerals were held every week with mothers of martyrs heading the mourners while promising more sons for the cause. Thus, motherhood became a sign of survival and defiance: mothers of martyrs announced that it was their aim in life to produce more martyrs. They paraded their young sons as evidence of the unending supply of heroes. At the time, death was a very likely future for these boys since the Iranian untrained militia forces, *basiji*, were recruited from children of school age and despatched to the front; some were barely 14 years old and had about a fortnight's training before they were sent to fight. Death was probable and the belief that martyrdom would secure a passage to heaven was absolute. Iranian resistance fighters, and subsequently the Iranian government at war with Iraq, publicly 'congratulated' the mothers of these 'martyrs'. Mothers of martyrs were celebrated, filmed, and interviewed. The rhetoric was backed by official government encouragement and pro-natalist propaganda as well as by

financial rewards. Even though the rewards were negligible, the hype and publicity verged on the hysterical. Women who had many martyred sons were offered pensions for their achievements, given prizes, hauled up at Friday prayers, and praised for offering their sons to the war and helping them achieve martyrdom. Through motherhood, then, these women became heroines. Women were not warriors, their battles were emotional; they were the ones who sacrificed their loved ones for the nation and for the cause.

This same symbolism remains extremely powerful in Palestine, where the mood of sacrifice and martyrdom has become embedded in the *intifada*. Religious leaders continuously announce to the world that their highest aspiration is to achieve martyrdom, and the mothers of martyrs proclaim proudly that they are prepared to offer their remaining sons to the cause.

Although the celebration of martyrdom is not exclusively an Islamic custom, the concept of martyrdom is deeply rooted in the theology of the Shii sect. There is a long-standing belief that giving one's life for a just cause is a noble act that is rewarded in heaven. But martyrdom and heroism in the early days of Islam were not the exclusive domain of men. Almost all the descendants of the Prophet – men as well as women, and children – took to the front in the Battle of Karbala to fight against the Caliph Muaviyeh, whom they accused of usurping power. Almost all the men were killed. Though soundly defeated, their massacre in Karbala created the powerful symbolism of martyrdom, which has remained a central motive among the minority Shiias in general, and Iranians in particular. Female descendants of the Prophet not only took part in battles but also made history by denouncing Muaviyeh and publicly declaring the right of the descendants of the Prophet to lead the *umma*, community of Muslims. There was nothing quiet, veiled, absent, or enclosed in the private domain about these women in the golden days of Islam. They went into an unequal battle against the usurpers of power and, when taken prisoner, they made brave speeches denouncing Muaviyeh for his savage and disrespectful treatment of the descendants of the Prophet.

This deeply rooted symbolism came very much to the fore during the revolution and the war against Iraq. But it is sad and ironic that 14 centuries later the Islamic revolution should use images of veiled secluded women as the symbols of success and in many cases seek to enclose and exclude them from the public domain as an indication

of progress and Islamism – when these women participated in the revolution, they did so for ideals that did not include their exclusion from the public domain.

Post-war reconstruction

Wars don't simply end

And wars don't end simply

Wars have their endings inside families.

(Enloe 1996:299, 306)

For too long, wars, revolutions, and militarist governments have been seen as male affairs with men fighting for masculine causes, ranging from defending specific classes or ideologies to protecting the interests of groups or nations. In these contexts, women – defined in terms of their function as wives, mothers, and keepers of the nation – are used as incentives to make male soldiers obedient, willing to kill for the sake of maintaining the socially constructed notions the woman embodies (Enloe 1988:20). The presence of women as icons is celebrated, but often their active contribution to the cause is shaded out by history and by subsequent political developments. In post-conflict periods, ideas of national security are redefined in terms of safeguarding the political and social status quo, rooted in the practical and symbolic mobilisation of gender identities, roles, and bodies, in the service of the new polity.

In the post-war and post-violence phases, women are expected to make the necessary practical and emotional adjustments to go back to their traditional role of 'homemakers'. Ideologies do not change during wars; they are simply suspended. Emerging post-war nations very frequently reconstruct an idea of nationalism which is heavily dependent on control over their women 'in the effort to protect, revive and create nations' (Basch 1997:5). Even where women have been active participants in liberation struggles, more often than not the aftermath of violence appears to result in their confinement to the domestic sphere where it is assumed they will be 'protected'. Embedded in this notion of protection is the idea of securing the safety of women and children. The protection of the home and family becomes central to peace-building efforts even when, as is often the case, homes have been attacked and ravaged.

Wars break asunder once-integrated communities, which may fracture along lines of racial, ethnic, or religious identity or party

affiliation, whether real, imagined, or reconstructed. The wars in Bosnia, Ethiopia, and Lebanon are but a few examples. Such wars manipulate identity and make it much harder for women to maintain their place in society and continue in their time-honoured function as cultural transmitters and socialisers within their families. The Iraqi invasion of Iran immediately made 51 per cent of the Iraqis, who like Iranians are of the Shiia Muslim sect, into the enemies of their own nation. Marriages amongst Sunnis and Shiias in Iraq, which had hitherto been commonplace, suddenly became sites of contestation. As elsewhere, the war in Iran fractured homes, families, and women's sense of identity.

A feminist perspective on post-war definition of citizenship

Exploding the myths about women's absence from wars and conflict also entails recognising that they may well bring a different perspective on how to end the violence and work towards peace. Although women all over the world have different views about war and militarism, it can be argued that many of them share a strong commitment to peace and nurturing. This enables them to survive wars, which are not of their making, and devastation and revolutions, which do not benefit them. Feminists, who perceive the commonality of women's experience as superseding man-made national boundaries, thus offer an alternative approach. They often see beyond the 'abstractions and deceptions' of borders and boundaries which enflame the intertwining, swirling circles of violence and are able to identify overarching symbols of unity and shared values that transcend those artificial divides.

Lebanese women authors have blazed a trail by writing about ways of analysing and surviving wars without rancour, and seeing them instead as life experiences of a historical continuum. Authors such as Jean Said Makdisi, Etel Adnan, and Emily Nasrallah have created a 'narrative of peace politics'; they write out of war and about war, but most of all they write *against* war (Cooke 1999:84). Writing from the margins, they reveal the artificiality of the Lebanese War Story that imposed an order 'on the chaos of emotions, motivation and outcomes of the war' (Makdisi 1990:76). They highlight the reality that in Lebanon there were no clear boundaries between war and peace, but rather periods of calm which embodied 'different degrees of being at war' (Makdisi 1990:76). For them, stark categorisations

like war and peace are not useful in describing their lives, which instead moved along a continuum between 'war and not-war' (Cooke 1999:84).

Using the traditional craft of storytelling and their traditional roles as keepers of memories, these women use the power of words to create a different understanding. They conventionalise a new centre, which does not break down along neat distinctions between 'friend and foe, victory and defeat, front and home front' (Makdisi 1990:76). These writers see the 'static' definition of nationalism as irrelevant. They argue that there should be different criteria of belonging to a nation. They want to explode the myth that men go to war to protect their women and that women prefer that their men die in combat rather than return in defeat (Cooke 1999:76).

The poet and painter Etel Adnan has used women's traditional role as witnesses and keepers of memories to write a different story about motherhood and suffering (Adnan 1993:159). She attributes a 'magical power' to motherhood, to suffering for the deaths of martyrs and survival: the power to heal societal wounds with words. She writes about the insight that such suffering brings to understanding war and peace as holistic processes. In this alternative vision, motherhood is seen not as an emblem of war, but as a symbol of peace building. Here, motherhood at times of war ceases to be merely about cradles and coffins and becomes also about healing.

The absence of a clear boundary between the war and the home fronts means that ordinary women live as mothers of militiamen and also 'chid[e] them as naughty sons for wreaking such havoc'. As scolding mothers they undermine the glories of gun-toting and put themselves in a position of authority over the generators of the violence. In other words, they become involved in and assume responsibility for trying to stop the war (Makdisi 1990:76).

Lebanese women authors have created a perspective whereby the heavy burden of grief and suffering is seen as a means of enabling them, and potentially enabling nations, to gain a new understanding of the wasteland that wars create. The survivors should have the strength to move towards a 'humanistic nationalism'. This is very different from the male perception, which defines nationalism as an absolute sense of belonging that is constructed within a binary framework of differentiation and recognition. Whereas in this male perception the nation is the undisputed birthright only of those who 'naturally' belong to it, the feminist humanists define the nation as

dialectic, as both produced and productive. Citizenship ceases to be a birthright or a reward for military service; it becomes an identity that can be acquired by shared suffering and grief. The survivors do not have allegiance to a single polity, but rather to the diverse and fragmented realities that form and re-form in different alliances and networks to ensure survival. It is the sorrow of those who stayed and survived that forms the nucleus of allegiance and support. Their shared suffering unites them and creates a sense of shared identity. Suffering and survival create new roots in new places and bring with them old experiences and understandings. No one feels entitled to any particular piece of the earth. Their suffering and shared identities as mothers and wives give women access to the whole world as a homeland, while they keep 'a very tiny place' into which they can 'sink their roots'; roots which are both ancient and modern, firm and flexible (Nasrallah 1985:16). The women Nasrallah writes about have uprooted and re-rooted themselves, and continue to keep a sense of belonging.

When women themselves take charge of their own identity, they often celebrate motherhood as a harbinger of peace, an experience that could bridge the gap between women across wide religious and national divides. In Argentina, the *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo* (mothers of the disappeared) used the powerful symbol of motherhood to demand justice and peace. Like the *Madres*, the Black Sash organisation in South Africa gathered about 2000 women who took to the streets demanding peace in the name of motherhood. These largely English-speaking and middle-class women used motherhood as a banner for peace and reconciliation. For such women, motherhood entails responsibility for life and not death.

Movements like the Black Sash, the *Madres*, and the Detainees' Parent Support Committee (DPSC), among many more, have created a new form of resistance to the state, to tyranny, and to death-mongers: a resistance based on the notion of motherhood, parenthood, and the family. Wars, revolutions, and injustice politicised mothers and family relations, and proved important in mobilising women. Mothers as protectors of their children and of the nation can and have used the maternal image to oppose war, forced conscription, and militarism. These are the women who identify themselves as the voice of nurturers and preservers.

In Iran, where there was a counter-movement of nurturers, individual mothers on occasion laid siege to the barracks where their

conscripted sons were being trained to be sent to war. The story of Khatoun, a young mother from a village in the central province, has become legendary. Khatoun followed the conscription lorry by begging a lift from a distant relative who owned a van. She then stayed on the pavement outside the barracks crying the traditional scream, *shivan*, which women do in ceremonies of mourning. She stopped passers-by to ask them to share in her grief and think about a war and a revolution that deprived peasant women of their invaluable young sons only to squander their lives at the front. She cried and screamed for almost a week. Although few newspapers reported her vigil, every day crowds gathered around her in support. Eventually the authorities invented a bureaucratic excuse for releasing her son and both mother and son returned to their village.

Women across the Palestinian–Israeli divide have linked hands physically both by keeping vigils as mothers on public squares and by sewing shared patchwork quilts across the length and the breadth of the two nations. Women across the divide in former Yugoslavia are seeking to forge common bonds. Muslim women across the world, even across the Iranian and Iraqi borders, have united in their abhorrence of what the Taleban did to women in the name of Islam.

These and other symbolic gestures may as yet be too few and far between, but feminism has a vital contribution to make to peace building and post-war reconstruction around the world. The first halting steps have been taken, the bigger strides are yet to come.

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