Development, Women, and War

Feminist Perspectives

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Development, Women, and War

Feminist Perspectives

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Preface

Deborah Eade

After three decades of trying to get 'gender onto the development agenda', it is now widely recognised that, although the indicators of women's subordination to men are universal, persistent, and fairly comprehensive[1], this does not mean that women constitute a homogeneous group. Nor does it mean that their interests or needs[2] are identical across social, economic, cultural, political, and other divides.

In the context of humanitarian work, however, and certainly in terms of how the issues are presented in the mass media, women are commonly seen in terms of their membership of a group or community. While terms such as 'the plight of women' (be they Afghan or Albanian or Angolan) distinguish them from men, this is at the expense of insisting upon their commonality as women in ways that invariably gloss over significant differences among them. The ensuing narrative either insists upon women's victimhood and their helplessness in the face of suffering and adversity; or it stresses their resourcefulness, their 'inner strength', their stoical struggle to keep their families going, their 'natural' identification with peace. Men prosecute war to defend the homeland, and women bind the social wounds and keep the home fires burning. Men, in this dualistic portrayal, will negotiate only from a position of power that is ultimately based on violence, or the threat of violence; women will look for compromises that do not involve such zero-sum games.

This narrative finds it even more difficult to countenance the engagement of women in violence and destruction than to recognise that many men do seek peaceful dialogue rather than solutions that are based upon aggression: that suicide bombers should include women seems to turn the world upside down. But real-life problems arise when emergency interventions and post-conflict programmes are based on distorted generalisations that not only deny women and men the full

range of human agency, but may also lock emerging societies into ill-fitting roles that diminish rather than enhance their development potential.

This Reader comprises two parts. The first is introduced by Haleh Afshar and is based on her guest-edited issue of the journal *Development in Practice* (Volume 13, Numbers 2 & 3) published in May 2003. A feminist scholar and activist, and a prominent commentator on contemporary Islamic affairs, Haleh Afshar is Professor of Politics at the University of York. Contributors on the overarching theme of women, war, and peace building describe the work of women (some feminist, some not) who are actively engaged in trying to (re-) build equitable and sustainable societies in the very process of living through or emerging from war.

The second part of this Reader contains a selection of papers drawn from other issues of the journal and elsewhere focusing on the ways in which aid agencies often relate to the 'victims' of conflict, who are predominantly 'womenandchildren' (to borrow Susan McKay's phrase, quoted in Karam 2001:19), and considering how external agencies might best support these 'victims' and other civilians in their own peace-building efforts.

The experience of living or working in a situation of armed conflict defies generalisation: every war or situation of political violence has its own distinct characteristics. In terms of gender-power relations, there are grounds for guarded optimism in some cases, near despair in others. Human beings do adapt to new circumstances and will devise all manner of ways to secure their survival even in the most desperate of situations. It is a piece of aid-agency lore that social disruption can, in some instances, open up new opportunities for women that enable them to break out of restrictive gender stereotypes. The legacy of women's clandestine networks in Afghanistan described by Elaheh Rostami Povey is one such case, the growing political agency and 'self-protection' capacities of peasant women during the war in El Salvador chronicled by Martha Thompson and Deborah Eade is another. These and other experiences recorded in this volume show what women can achieve when they are able to organise autonomously, as women and as citizens. And yet, the overwhelming evidence is that, although women do characteristically take on additional burdens in order to secure the survival of their families, often assuming extra economic and public (including military) responsibilities over and above their reproductive work, these changes in gender roles are

generally contingent and context-specific, and as such fail to take root within a broader project of social transformation. So unless women are able to distinguish for themselves between the desirable and negative outcomes of social upheaval, and mobilise to defend what they perceive as improvements in their quality of life, the ideological undertow is all too likely to sweep away any fragile gains women may have experienced during wartime and may well usher in 'traditional' patterns of gender-power relations.

It is a sad reflection of the crisis facing political institutions throughout much of the contemporary world that this collection cannot be comprehensive in its coverage of existing armed conflicts, and that more will almost certainly have broken out than been resolved even before it goes to press. At the time of writing, the situation in post-war Iraq remains highly unstable, the peace processes in the Middle East and West Africa are at best precarious, the conflict in Colombia bleeds on almost unnoticed, and the 'war on terror' seems set to claim more lives. The need for new perspectives on conflict, new approaches to peace building and conflict resolution, could not be more urgent. If this volume helps readers to look at these issues in a more creative way, then it will have contributed in some small way to meeting that need.

Notes

1 UNDP's Gender-related Development Index (GDI) ranks countries according to the life expectancy, adult literacy, education, and earnings of women relative to men. Even in Norway, the highest-ranking country on both the Human Development Index (HDI) and the GDI, despite their higher average level of education, women still earn only two-thirds of average male earnings (UNDP 2003). The world over, from rural and urban sectors in developing countries to OECD nations, women generally work longer hours but earn less money than men. The Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) looks at women's representation in public and professional life. High-income Japan, which ranks ninth in the world in terms of human development, drops to thirteenth position on this index: women hold only 10 per cent of parliamentary seats, compared with 30 per cent in South Africa; fewer than 10 per cent of Japanese legislators and senior officials are women, compared, for example, with 36 per cent in Honduras; and while 45 per cent of professional and technical workers in Japan are women, countries as varied as Brazil, Philippines, and Poland all do significantly better on this score. In other words, a country's HDI ranking can mask considerable female disadvantage, while a low HDI or GDI ranking does not necessarily mean that women are absent from public life.

2 A reference to the pioneering distinction between strategic and practical interests, as originally defined by Maxine Molyneux (1985), and strategic and practical needs, the approach later developed by Caroline Moser (1989).

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Part One: Introduction
War and peace: what do women contribute?

Haleh Afshar

Much has been written about women's suffering in times of war, but despite the lip-service, little has actually been done. Part One of this Reader is based on the guest-edited issue of *Development in Practice* (Volume 13, Numbers 2 & 3), in which contributors discuss conflicts that have raged throughout the Middle East, Africa, and Eastern Europe over the past century and highlight the commonalities of some of what women experience of women during wars and their potential to contribute both to war and particularly to peace. They consider some of the reasons why women's concerns have yet to be placed at the forefront of both analysis and practical outcomes, and present an overview of different feminist approaches to peace building and conflict resolution, and concrete policy measures to achieve these ends. The authors address major conceptual and practical problems in the hope of paving the way towards establishing effective strategies that might help us to realise hopes that have been written about for decades. They argue that is important to move beyond the myriad projects that involve women to consider the factors that contribute to the relatively poor overall impact of such projects, an outcome which often results from a failure to understand the underlying gendered power relations and the dynamics of social change.

Many of these papers were presented at two meetings held at the University of York: a February 2001 conference organised by International Alert and Dr Sultan Barakat, director of the Post War Reconstruction and Development Unit; and a subsequent meeting in May 2002 of the Women and Development Study Group of the Development Studies Association (DSA). The organisers and contributors were acutely aware of the dearth of literature and analysis concerning the situation of women in conflict, post-conflict, and

reconstruction, and that what does exist remains too much at the level of rhetoric and has yet to be translated into concrete and effective measures. The papers reproduced here therefore focus on women on the ground: what happens to them during wars and what are their demands in the subsequent periods of peace and reconstruction. The authors come from both academic and practitioner backgrounds and have sought to combine their theoretical and practical knowledge in order to forge more effective measures and suggest changes that could lead to the inclusion of women at all stages of post-war and reconstruction processes. Above all, they consider the practicalities of meeting the specific gendered demands that must be taken into account, understood, and then placed at the forefront of policy making.

This section begins with papers offering an overview of the situation of women at times of war and peace which explode some prevalent myths, including the assumption that the war front is separate from the home front or that women are always victims in times of conflict. The authors argue that such analysis is simplistic and that at times the very terminology used to define conflict, war, and the war front can be misleading. Conflicts can both empower and disempower women, since women can be at the same time included in practice and yet excluded ideologically, or they may be both victims and agents of change – though they often have no effective choice in these matters. They may opt to be fighters and yet be attacked and raped; they may choose to provide back-up support and yet simultaneously find themselves and their homes in the firing line; they may be caught in transgressions – such as cross-division marriages – that could have been bridges towards peace but may instead have become causes of hatred and war. Through the hardships they experience, many women do develop visions of peace that are rooted in their shared sufferings, but that cannot be translated into negotiations which are themselves anchored in hatreds, and bounded by geographical, religious, and historical divisions that ignore the commonality of experiences that women know so well. The views and experiences of such women are too complex to be included in documents that simply divide up territories and allocate material resources.

Peace processes, whether at local, national, or international levels, seldom include the perspectives that emerge from women's shared suffering. Even the choices that many women make at times of war and conflict may still be condemned when peace is being negotiated,

or be rejected once formal peace has been achieved: all too often women are expected to abandon any positions of responsibility and authority they may have achieved when the men were at war and are expected to return to the domestic realm if and when peace returns. Commonly, what the returning warriors bring home is violence, fear, and domination, while their women are expected to bear the pain and remain silent and submissive in the name of peace and unity. The crisis of masculinity and difficulties of facing 'the enemies within' make it hard if not impossible to include some of the demands that women would wish to make as part of the processes of peace making. There is as yet little hope that national boundaries will be abandoned. Nationalism and national identities are unlikely to be discarded even though women generally lack the right to bestow such identities, despite having been given the duty of protecting them.

In the first paper **Donna Pankhurst** sets out the overall framework and in the second I outline the difficulties that must still be confronted in mainstreaming women and their demands. Along with other contributors, these two authors contend that these demands are multilayered and not easily perceived, and that they will not be remedied simply by the use of politically correct language. Given that it is often impossible to use straightforward analytical categories since women cut across boundaries and cannot be defined as a single group, the task becomes all the more difficult at times of war and unrest. Pankhurst notes that women have greatly contrasting experiences of war, experiences that are also mediated by differences in age, class, and regional or ethnic backgrounds. That said, women have been less likely than men to initiate wars and have, universally, been ascribed the identity of 'victim'. But such generalisations also hide the reality that women seldom have a choice about whether they are indeed victims or active participants. There are no longer war fronts and, as it were, 'backs' or areas 'behind the lines' since homes, schools, hospitals, public highways, and even personal relationships are often part of the arena of war. Men and women who marry across the invisible boundaries of faith and ethnicity find themselves torn by subsequent conflicts, as has been the case of pre-war and subsequent marriages between Muslims and Christians in the former Yugoslavia and between Shiia and Sunni Muslims in Iraq. There is little choice about victimhood when individuals cannot break away from the constraints placed upon them by tight-gripping ethnic, religious, or regional identities.

In her article, **Judy El-Bushra** argues that to understand the problems it is important to adopt an approach based upon a gender analysis that can describe the situations both of men and of women. This analysis might well indicate that both sexes are 'excluded', albeit in different ways. She suggests that gender relations may indeed change through conflict: for instance, at moments of crisis there is often more political space for women to take on male roles in the absence of men. But positive experiences must be placed in the context of the daily pain, suffering, and deprivation that wars bring for civilians. As Pankhurst, El-Bushra, and I argue, conflicts may be simultaneously empowering and disempowering. They erode gender barriers but burden women with greater responsibilities, which are not then easily translated into power. The need to cope makes women more independent, more effective, more outward-looking, yet they also feel 'a desperate solitude'; conflicts tear asunder family units and extended kinship networks, and deprive entire communities of their beloved sons, husbands, and sometimes their daughters as well, leaving women in charge of destitute families.

However, although gender barriers may become less rigid, gender identities often do not change, and the emphasis on motherhood and domesticity remains central to the survival of the entire community. At such times women may be able to exercise more control over whom they marry and when, but they cannot shirk the maternal and family duties that become harder to meet as the conflict deprives them still further of resources and opportunities. Maternal roles are often translated into symbols of nationhood and, as in the case of mothers of martyrs, almost an emblem of conflict. But women are generally unable to use this shared suffering to form a chain to link the opposing parties through their common understanding of loss and sorrow.

Conflicts may propel women into a more active arena, but at the same time rapid changes in gender roles may create a crisis of masculinity. El-Bushra argues that conflict generates confusion for both sexes about what values should be retained, and this in turn creates a wider social crisis. The outcome of the tension between the underlying gender relations and the new relations which conflict makes necessary have a spiral effect as one consequence leads to others, making it difficult to pinpoint what is cause and what is effect. But all too often the outcome appears to be a return to ossified pre-conflict gender ideologies. Pankhurst and El-Bushra, as well as **Maria Holt**, note the importance of analysing the impact of these

changing roles in relation to masculinity and of recognising the negative outcomes that a crisis of masculinity is likely to mean for post-war resolution.

But despite the many shortcomings and problems, women activists have continued to struggle to obtain a voice and improve their overall condition. The second set of papers focus on peace making and peacekeeping, and especially on developing peace in ways that comprehensively include women as participants and as beneficiaries. Here, our contributors argue that the most difficult problem is that, despite the rhetoric, development and reconstruction programmes have remained largely gender blind. Peace-building processes have frequently been focused on short-term measures initiated and administered by organisations that are themselves patriarchal and hierarchical, and whose recruitment processes continue to be anchored in the 'old boy network' and rigid hierarchies. Unless the processes and the relevant organisations change, women stand little hope of success. To achieve peace and democratisation, national and international agencies have to focus on dealing with the problems of existing power structures and seek to develop processes that might be able to reform them and thus open the way for women and their interests. As **Lesley Abdela** shows in her essay, changing the gendered nature of hierarchy is never easy and at times may appear virtually impossible; there is still a tendency for international powers to choose and appoint all-male transitional governments which, inevitably, are poorly qualified to represent women's interests in the nation-building process. Abdela suggests a complete rethinking of peace-building strategies, and supports **Chris Corrin**'s view that the democratisation process has to be properly thought through over the long term with appropriate levels and types of investment and the comprehensive inclusion of women throughout. Thus, change is needed not only within the countries experiencing conflict but also within the international agencies and their working methods.

All the above problems and challenges notwithstanding, the contributors show that it is possible to make some inroads. Working with women and seeking to reflect their views, Abdela argues that to secure women-centred democratisation, albeit fraught with difficulties, remains an important and feasible objective. However, as **Angela Mackay** demonstrates, translating aims into reality is no easy matter. Training peacekeepers, both uniformed and civilian, about gender and about the human rights of women and children is a

complex and difficult process. Mackay shows that providing culturally sensitive and effective gender training for peacekeepers, a project in which she has been involved in recent years, may be hard but is nevertheless essential and can go a long way towards removing blinkered visions and enabling the trainees to understand how they can make a difference and take responsibility for their own actions. Inviting the peace makers and the peacekeepers to think through the prevailing gender blindness can in the long run open the way to more sensitive practices. Training the peacekeepers is challenging but rewarding, and gender awareness should become part and parcel of the basic skills requirements of all peacekeeping forces.

Corrin and **Elaheh Rostami Povey** highlight the necessity of including women activists who have worked at the grassroots during times of war and conflict because they have so much to contribute to peace building and to the post-war decision-making process. Perhaps the most effective means of facilitating women's access to power would be through the provision of effective training, education, and schooling. Long-term investment in such infrastructure could help to build up the basis for real democratisation, as opposed to repeated exercises in voting, which often simply reproduce existing power structures. Corrin argues that skill reconstruction, rehabilitation, and democracy building can only be effective if and when there is a gender audit in place to help identify and minimise discriminatory practices. Inclusiveness requires dialogue and understanding, and an awareness that the process is both lengthy and expensive: education systems have to be rebuilt and infrastructure has to be put in place and sustained. But these investments, and the training of women for managerial roles, all form part of the process that could 'develop peace'.

The authors believe that, despite the difficulties, the diverse and effective coping mechanisms that women have developed during situations of war and conflict could be an invaluable resource to facilitate their successful integration in the post-war context. At times of conflict, women use their family networks and friendship skills to build solidarity groups to deal with both immediate and long-term problems. Often, as in the cases of Palestinian and Afghan women among others, women assume positions which allow them to intervene not only to help with short-term needs but also to defend women's rights and seek to secure a better position for them in the long term. The articles by Corrin, Abdela, Holt, Rostami Povey, El-Bushra, and **Ann Jordan** show that, ultimately, the success and

effectiveness of such groups depend largely on the prevailing political circumstances. Jordan provides clear examples of the variety of ways in which women have been effective peace workers and offers possible avenues for empowering them to continue in this role.

In all cases, the diversity of cultures and norms as well as differences in women's backgrounds, ages, and aspirations make it impossible for researchers to produce formulaic proposals for how to ensure the integration of women in peace-building processes and in any eventual democratisation. The need to include women in such processes has finally been accepted. But, as with every other feminist demand, there remains a gap between theory and practice. The articles drawn from the special issue of *Development in Practice*, together with those included in Part Two of this Reader, offer a number of proposals that advocate programmes and policies that are more culturally specific, more focused, more long term, and far more in-depth than is usually the case in dealing with women and war, and that begin with women from the grassroots upwards. These proposals come from both academics and practitioners: some of the authors have studied the problems addressed here from an academic perspective over a long period of time, while others are actively involved in building such processes and in the delivery of programmes on the ground. The hope is that funds will follow the practitioners and that practice will follow the theories, sooner rather than later.

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