

Rejecting traditional Gandhian symbols of passivity and victimhood, women peace activists have evolved their own spaces, theories and action behaviour. But is it still fine to frolic over military fences dressed as fairies?

It depends how we feel at the time...¹

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In Britain, the majority of Trident Ploughshares 2000 campaigners who've appeared in court for attempting to peacefully disarm Trident are women (see February *PN*); it was women who disarmed the Hawk warplanes bound for Indonesia (see March 1996 *PN*); there is still a women's camp at Greenham, and women's camp(aign)s at the Menwith Hill Spy Base, at the British Nuclear Fuels Ltd plant at Sellafield and the Atomic Weapons Establishment at Aldermaston. Around Britain there are individuals and small groups of women active in all types of peace, anti-nuclear, anti-arms-trade, anti-war, depleted uranium, international solidarity and other campaigns. But there is nothing that can be described as a movement. Now, less than ten years after the last nuclear cruise missiles left Britain, there is very little of that sense of a movement that was generated around Greenham — just a loose network of groups and individual women with the links between them tenuous and contingent.

Few women active in women's peace or anti-war groups tend to see their work as existing within an explicitly theoretical framework. However Sasha Roseniel suggested in her analysis of the Women's Peace Camp at Greenham Common Cruise missile base in the 1980s, that there was a diversity of perspectives amongst the women involved, and an active development of theory which constructed itself — though again few women would have put it this way — through cognitive praxis². Put more simply: learning by doing. Neither would many women recognise or consciously define themselves as working within one of the three strands within in the women's peace movement, defined by other writers. Indeed, throughout the 80s within the women's peace movement, there was a suspicion of, and indeed a certain amount of hostility to, the theoretical academic feminism that informed these various analyses.

Maternalist, materialist, feminist

In such analyses of the peace movement, women's motivations were identified with three theoretical positions: the maternalist, the materialist and the feminist. Certainly, the maternalist motivation — to create a better world for our children — or to protect the planet for the future — links easily with the materialist arguments — such as those expressed in slogans like Bread not Bombs, or Welfare before Warheads. Both, though often articulated through different actions, presuppose that the peace movement can influence governments to change their policies or priorities — by power of argument or by persuading them to allocate fewer resources to the military. However, both fail to challenge the concept — and activity — of militarism as a legitimate occupation for the state.

We'd suggest that it is only the feminists who have challenged all aspects of militarism in an analysis which places the women's peace movement outside and in opposition to the state. Yet we cannot assume that feminism is a natural ally of the peace movement. Indeed in the 1980s women living at Greenham Common were criticised by the women's movement — and the peace movement — for monopolising the argument around cruise missiles.

In more recent years, mainstream feminism — with an agenda of equality — has seen women pressing for increased opportunities for women within the military-industrial complex. It is this which — particularly in the US — has sought to place women in combat roles, demonstrated recently on British TV interview by a Kate Adie (BBC reporter) in paramilitary outfit interviewing a female Flight-Lieutenant aboard an AWAX aircraft. "I suppose I'm coordinating this whole operation" (NATO planes bombing Serbia), she replied with a modest toss of her coiffured hair. The relationships between women and militarism are varied and take many different forms. And though the military is clearly defined as masculine, like many locations of male power, its boundaries are sufficiently flexible to adapt sufficiently to easily incorporate complicit women into its masculine space.

Women against militarism

This leaves a very small minority of women — and we should not exaggerate our importance or our number — who define themselves as feminist, who place themselves in a position of active opposition or resistance to the military, and who expresses a specific and gendered critique of war as state-sanctioned male violence.

Gender is seen here the social relations between men and women — informing, constructing and maintaining a relationship dominated by masculine power, just as other forms of power dominate the relationships of race and class.

This analysis places war within the repertoire of male violence (against women and often children). Within this context — which includes oppressive relationships, domestic violence and abuse, rape, war is the

ultimate act of male violence. Nuclear war — and the development, possession, deployment and ultimate use of nuclear weapons — is seen as the ultimate act of patriarchal violence: the power to destroy the world. As women in Belgrade wrote in 1998 about the emerging war in Kosova: “no matter which armies (are involved), men’s violence against women will be intensified: rape in war, rape in refugee camps, prostitution, sexual trafficking with women, violence in families, ethnic cleansing in mixed marriages, sexual harassment, incest. Every war makes social and private relations more patriarchal and legalises the militarism, which means that the status of women decreases and hate against women increases.”

Women as victims

Women are increasingly the primary victims of war, from the wives and mothers bereaved by the deaths of their husbands and sons in combat, to women who increasingly make up the majority of refugees. Women are subject to particularly gendered forms of violence such as the systematic use of rape as a weapon of war as seen in Bosnia, and now in Kosova. As Mary Kaldor has recently pointed out, in the last century male combatants died at the rate of eight to every civilians killed. In recent wars, the ratio is almost totally reversed.

From a feminist perspective — of women as the victims of war — the Gandhian philosophy of nonviolence becomes problematic. As Ulla Eberhard wrote in 1987, “classic theories of nonviolence demand a willingness to suffer” and require nonviolent actions that “clearly show the subordination of the activist to the oppressor”³. We are rewarded by knowing that morally we are right, and have earned our place in heaven. This means that if we want, we can choose to behave as victims — with almost an implicit contract that this will “dare” the police or military to behave violently to us — because, if they do, we will feel morally superior, and they will feel bad about it. But is this sense of moral superiority enough?

The peace movement has reclaimed the role of victim as a powerful way of protest, and developed a whole repertoire of actions in which we — the powerless — confront them — the powerful. Symbolically, we identify with the victims of war, particularly the victims of nuclear war, by placing our bodies in front of vehicles, outside significant buildings, in the middle of roads — reminding the powerful of those that they have or will or would wish to kill. But whether this works on even a symbolic level has never really been understood. We — the peace movement, the anti-militarists — understand the discourse, but when we see ourselves symbolically representing the nuclear dead, how do *they* see us? Is the discourse of power understood by all the participants? Perhaps, of most importance for us, does the role of victim challenge those in power, or does it merely reinforce their power.

A feminist analysis of war and militarism informs women’s reluctance to express themselves as victims when they challenge the military. Indeed for many women, who have survived violence and abuse — and for those who have worked with survivors of violence — it can be extremely disturbing and distressing to accept practice which places value on victimhood.

The reluctance of women to see themselves as victims was articulated by Ulla Eberhard and others in the 1980s. Her analysis suggested that women were developing a more confrontational identity — which we could describe as active nonviolence — and which she characterised as “Not peaceful and not quiet”, seen in actions where women express their rage and fury, take possession instead of being possessed, are noisy rather than silent, and show anger instead of suffering, self-love rather than self sacrifice.

Of course, theory and practice, are different things. Sometimes we feel like victims; sometimes we don’t. Some women feel like victims; other women don’t. As one woman put it, “it depends how we feel at the time”. Sometimes we are too disempowered to find even the smallest voice; sometimes our anger can be inappropriate and counter-productive; but sometimes it is just so good to scream and shout.

Good Girls and Bad Girls

Many women — or bad girls — who reject the Gandhian approach admitted that they took actions that challenged both the political/military, but also the boundaries of femininity. Where else — apart from in the army or in one of those active-management training courses — could we find the opportunity to hide in ditches, slink through the undergrowth, climb and cut fences and lie in front of moving vehicles? We find it exciting and frightening at the same time, and some of us even admit to an adrenaline buzz. We were — or wanted to be — the little girls who climbed trees, built dens, hid in dustbins, explored building sites, and played in dangerous places.

When we take direct action against the military or when we confront the police or the arms companies, we’re also challenging the power which constructs and maintains gender: the power which gives masculinity its authority to act with violence. And sometimes we also have to negotiate or challenge the boundaries constructed by gender within the “peace movement” itself.

This culture of disobedience does not always sit happily with our fellows in the peace movement, but if we refuse to accept the rules of the state, and are to challenge the basic assumption that the state can wage wars, then we also need to challenge both the assumptions of the militarised states in which we live, and the assumptions of the movements in which we work .

Within the TP2000 campaign, for example, when Aldermaston women were arrested for their submarine action, they chose not to cooperate with the police. One woman felt that the inequality of the power relationship between herself and the police was not a useful forum for a constructive exchange on the illegality of nuclear weapons.

"I wanted the circumstances of explaining my actions to be under my control. Although the police said 'I'm here to listen to you'. I disagreed because he was just there to convict me. In an unequal power relationship I don't think you have to answer some one else's questions in the way and format they are demanding. It is often the case that men ask women questions and assume that they have the right to be

answered and I feel that you can teach people something by not meeting their expectations. I think its a good thing that the police realise that different types of people are involved (in ploughshares) so that they don't get complacent and feel that we are all the same or have the same approach or strategy." Another woman felt that her only response was to say "Fuck you, I don't care what you to do me, the worst thing you can do is lock me up". This is about giving a voice to our anger, and transforming that anger into a powerful resistance.

Women as not-victims

Women have specific and gendered reasons for challenging the military , and that this means that we do have to claim a space for women to act autonomously in the peace movement. In a small post-Cold-War peace movement, and in a post-feminist world, it is perhaps even more necessary than it was in the 1980s. We do not accept that women are, as some gynae-feminists would suggest, "naturally" nonviolent, and intrinsically pacifist. In Britain we've seen, for example, alongside the development of the post-feminist idea of girl power — as exemplified by the Spice Girls — the invention of the "Lad-ette"/"women-behaving-as-badly-as-men", and an increase in rates of conviction for violence amongst young women. We are just as socially conditioned into our roles as mothers, mopper-uppers after wars or babes, as men are socialised into their roles of protector, warrior and soldier; otherwise, why, as Cynthia Enloe has commented, do soldiers need to be trained to dehumanise their enemy, and why do some men choose to be conscientious objectors?⁴ Indeed if we can accept that current norms of gendered behaviour enable most men and women to accept their allotted roles and behaviour, then surely this offers perhaps the best possibility that in changing gender relations, the whole of the relationship of power that constructs violence can be changed.

But of course, while gender relations remain as they are, we do like to have it all ways. Using our femininity to subvert masculinity is one of our strengths as a movement: we've been taught since we were old enough to hold a Barbie that we can use vulnerability to get where we want. And this is why some women are completely happy taking direct action dressed as fairies, or taking a teddy bears picnic in the middle of a military base. The Aldermaston Ladies Rambling Club climbed fences in search of footpaths dressed in Edwardian frocks and big hats. But more often, it must be said, we wear "masculine" clothing — big boots and combat trousers (or cargo pants for the fashion conscious— it was leggings in the 80s) which are just useful for getting through gaps in fences, being dragged along the ground, moving fast, and walking around undetected at night. Are we challenging norms of femininity or are we just being practical?

But in order to use this vulnerability we have to be empowered, and it is through that long and sometimes difficult process that we find ourselves able to act in many and different ways. Of course, this is written from the luxurious perspective of the nice British peace movement where we and the military both know and even mutually negotiate the rules. We and they know that — even though the Ministry of Defence police may carry guns, they have not chosen to shoot at us yet.

Rejecting victimhood is rejecting the dominant metaphor of the abused female body. In order to place our bodies directly in the face of the military — we have to be able to resist the whole of the patriarchal myth.

A space for women

Women need to claim a separate space within the peace movement for both personal and political reasons. Though the number of politically active women who live a separatist existence — as did many at Greenham — are relatively small in number, some women continue to claim the space that those women constructed. Women who work, or have worked in the mainstream peace movements, still find their strength in working in women-only groups. Women feel that it is much easier to work in women-only groups — they feel more confident, more supported and more empowered — particularly important in potentially disempowering situations such as confronting the military or other forms of violence. Women also feel that there is more space to participate in different ways in women's groups which have traditionally tried — though not always succeeded — in enabling women to act, speak and contribute. Many made reference to the "different ways of working" they felt were more enabling and less hierarchical than those found in mixed groups.

Within these groups, women who make tea and wash up are — theoretically — as valued as those who climb fences or speak at public meetings. Creativity, shared experiences, intuitiveness and imagination are valued, rather than professional or academic expertise. There is also the feeling that women are able to occupy different spaces within their groups at different times, depending on their personal circumstances or energy levels. The support and solidarity they gained working in women's groups allowed and enabled them to work more effectively. In mixed groups, even able and confident women found that they were silenced and marginalised — and found it a constant effort to gain space for discussion and or priorities for action around gender-related issues. In women's groups and campaigns, they felt that they had access to an autonomy of speech and action.

The issue of men's different socialisation to violence, and their implicit or tacit role in the structural violence within society, also determined women's choices in rejecting mixed groups. In practical terms, women felt safer, for example, taking part in women-only NVDA — the absence of men did not provide the police or military with the opportunity or excuse to use violence. By working alone they could subvert and deconstruct the potential for violence.

Some women felt that they had almost a moral responsibility to create, present and provide alternative ways of doing/being/thinking/operating. Military and political policy and decision making was identified as a masculine arena in which women — despite for example, the growth in a feminist theory of international

relations — had no real control or influence. Though many women took part in “democratic political processes”, as activists, they also felt that they needed to construct alternative ways of thinking, even if only on a very small scale.

This feeling informed, for example, one woman’s relationship with the Ministry of Defence Police: “From a personal point of view, (I see) my incursions (into a nuclear weapons installation) as providing an example of such an alternative, with the option for the officer to join in... as far as is possible from within — or hopefully across — their structured position. I remember years ago a woman saying that when she stepped into the road (in front of a Cruise missile convoy) she was inviting the driver to stop — it was his decision. Violence is always an option for them — but so is the reverse. In a way every incursion is saying the same: I will not comply with their structures, and in their dealings with me, I invite them to step outside their normal responses, and, since as I am nonviolent they do not have the excuse to respond violently.”

But one of the reasons that women need to work together is because we don’t always feel confident and empowered. Sometimes we are disempowered and vulnerable, and we need to be able to deal with our fears and our vulnerability, and to be able to protect ourselves, and sometimes we just need to cry — and we can only do that with other women. Where there is trust, we can find our own boundaries and behaviours. And when we come out the other side, we are enabled and empowered to confront the violence and fear with strength and confidence. We can feel powerful in our selves and our actions. As women — and as survivors instead of victims — we can equally engage in "heroic" army-type actions like hammering submarines, or we can dress as bunny rabbits and hop across forbidden lands, or stand silently or sing loudly as a witness to the war crimes around us — it just depends how we feel at the time.

¹ From a comment made in discussion. Many thanks to the many women whose contributions to this discussion have informed this article — our conclusions are not necessarily theirs.

² Roseneil, Sasha, *Disarming Patriarchy: Feminism & Political Action at Greenham* (1995).

³ See Ulla Eberhard’s article, and the response to it by Pen Strange in *WRI Women* (Jan/Feb 1987).

⁴ Cynthia Enloe, *The Morning After. Sexual Politics at the End of the Cold War* (California, 1993).