

Seminar No. 7, 1992

Women, the Military and Militarisation: Some questions raised by the South African case

Presenter: Jacklyn Cock



Jacklyn Cock is Head of the [Sociology Department](#) at the University of the Witwatersrand.

Date: 24 September 1992

Venue: University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

Introduction

The starting point for this paper is the connection between militarisation and gender. To understand this connection we cannot focus narrowly on the position of women in armies and military institutions. Militarisation - the mobilisation of resources for war - is a gendering process. It both uses and maintains the ideological construction of gender in the definitions of "masculinity" and "femininity". Women are widely cast in the role of "the protected" and "defended", often excluded from military service and almost always - whether in conventional or guerrilla armies - excluded from direct combat. This division - separating the protector from the protected, defender from defended - is crucial to both sexism and militarism.

There are four ways in which the South African case is relevant to understanding the relation between gender and militarisation. Firstly, it illustrates how women - far from being marginalised from the process of militarisation - can actively contribute towards it. Secondly, it illustrates the similarities in the position of women in both conventional and guerrilla armies. Thirdly, the South African case illustrates the durability of patriarchy and the fragility of the gains made for women during periods of war. Fourthly, the South African experience sharpens the debate about the relation between equal rights and

women's participation in armies.

Militarisation

The role of women in militarisation has been largely obscured and mystified by two competing perspectives - those of sexism and feminism. Both analyses exclude women from war on the grounds that they are bearers of "special qualities". Sexism excludes women from the ranks of the military on the grounds of their physical inferiority and unsuitability for fighting. As the weaker sex women must be "protected" and "defended". One variant of feminism similarly excludes women but on opposite grounds - that of their innate nurturing qualities, their creativity and pacifism. Another variant of feminism - probably best articulated by Virginia Woolf - excludes women on the grounds that men have a monopoly of power. The outcome of these perspectives is that war is understood as a totally male affair and the military as a patriarchal institution - the last bastion of male power - from which women are excluded and by whom women are often victimised.

South Africa is only just emerging from a period of intense militarisation. During the decade of the eighties the state mobilised resources for war on political, ideological and economic levels (Cock, 1989). This process was spearheaded by the South African Defence Force (SADF).

The SADF is the most powerful force in Africa, with the capacity to mobilise a force of almost 500,000, extensive battle experience, and technically advanced weaponry and equipment. It has always been used to maintain the apartheid system and white minority rule. It has done so inside the country in a policy of violent repression and has engaged in an undeclared war of destabilisation of neighbouring states which has had devastating results.

White women contributed to this process in a number of different ways. They were a crucial source of ideological support for soldiers. They reproduced an ideology of gender roles that linked masculinity to militarism. They did so partly through socializing young men into a strong, aggressive masculinity and policing continuing conformity to that role. Many white women also contributed materially to the militarisation of South African

society through their work in support organisations which provided food parcels and recreational services for the heroized "boys on the border". Women also constituted the majority of workers in the arms industry, which made South Africa in the eighties the fifth largest arms exporter in the world.

During the decade of the eighties most white women in South Africa resolutely turned their heads away from the role of the SADF in violent repression. As Koonz (1987) has written of women in Nazi Germany, "They gazed instead at their own cradles, children and 'Aryan families'" (p. 17). As mothers and wives they made a vital contribution to the power of the apartheid state "by preserving the illusion of love in an environment of hatred" (p. 17). This is important. What we know of women in Nazi Germany and apartheid South Africa means the loss of the idea that there is something about femaleness that can insulate us from Nazism and its likes. In apartheid South Africa, as Gordon (1987) has written of Nazi Germany, "there were many women responsible for substantial brutality and many more enthusiastically supported men's brutality". (p. 100)

Women in Armies

The most obvious and direct way in which white women contributed to the militarisation of South Africa was in their role in the SADF. This brings us to the second way in which the South African case is significant - it enables us to compare the position of women in conventional and guerrilla armies within a single society.

The SADF and the ANC army, Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), reflect all the myriad differences between a conventional and a guerrilla army. However, in both armies there are significant similarities in the position of women. In both there has been a progressive incorporation of women in recent years, and in both armies women are excluded from combat roles. There are important questions behind these processes of incorporation and exclusion.

In both the SADF and MK there was a dramatic increase in the numbers of women soldiers between 1976 and 1990. Women now constitute almost 15% of the Permanent Force of the SADF and approximately 20% of cadres in MK. The two processes are

connected in that MK's expansion after 1976 fuelled the SADF perception of "threat levels" and a "manpower" crisis to which white women were seen as part of the solution.

Despite this process of increasing incorporation, in both armies women are under-represented in positions of leadership and authority.

There have only been two women who have reached the rank of brigadier in the SADF, there are no women generals and only ten women colonels (out of at least 600) at present. In the ANC until 1991 there were only three women on the National Executive Committee and only one woman in a formally acknowledged leadership position within MK - the head of communications, Jacqueline Molefe appointed in 1983 when her husband, Joe Modise became commander of the new MK headquarters. This under-representation may be linked to the fact that in both armies women are excluded from combat roles.

In the SADF there is a rigid sexual division of labour, both in training and deployment. Women volunteers are trained at the South African Army Women's College established in George in 1971 by PW Botha. Trainees are known as "Botha babies". Selection (approximately one fifth of applicants secure places) "favours girls who can present the image of women in uniform positively" (Interview). Instruction in the use of cosmetics is an important part of the curriculum. This illustrates how the SADF attempts to deflect any potential contradiction between the traditional conception of "femininity" and serving in the SADF.

The conscription of white women into the SADF was considered in the 1970s. According to a high ranking woman officer within the SADF, this "would have been bad from a morale point of view At the thought of it one can almost hear the waves breaking behind one's back. It would almost be acknowledging defeat to have to resort to using women." (Interview, 1989).

Most of the women in the SADF are confined to subordinate positions which reflect the sexual division of labour in the wider society. They are involved in telecommunications and signals, logistic, finance, administration, cartography, medical and welfare work, and instructional activity.

The exclusion of women from combat roles is justified on a number of different grounds such as:

- Women are unsuited to killing. "It's the task of women to give life and to preserve it".
- Women's socialisation is inappropriate.
- Women are incapacitated through physiological functions such as menstruation. "Women are less mentally agile, less well co-ordinated and accident prone during menstruation."
- Male chivalry. "Men would find it difficult to prevent themselves saying things like 'after you' or 'I'll take that, its too heavy for you'."

The SADF case suggests that the incorporation of women does not eliminate the subordination of women or even erode patriarchal authority relations. As Yuval-Davis (1985) has written of the Israeli Defence Force, the extremely hierarchical and bureaucratic nature of the SADF contributes to a sharp gender differentiation.

According to a number of informants there is no problem or sexual harassment within the SADF - probably because of the rigidly segregated pattern of training and deployment.

According to one SADF colonel:

Our sexual harassment problems in the SADF are not with men, but with two types of women - lesbians and 'losmeisies' (loose girls) who have no morals. Lesbians are easy to identify though and this is an important factor in recruiting. (Interview 1988)

These women clearly threaten the conventional definition of femininity which the SADF is at lengths to maintain.

Both the horizontal and vertical sexual division of labour is reinforced by the elaborate cultivation of femininity. There is no contradiction between femininity and serving in the SADF. The image of women serving in the SADF tends to be inflated to "superwoman" proportions. The SADF superwoman usually combines her SADF role with traditional domestic responsibilities as wives and mothers. Profiles of SADF women in the SADF

magazine *Paratus* emphasises their physical attractiveness, their cooking abilities, and domestic hobbies as well as their competence in their jobs. Thus the increasing incorporation of women into the SADF has not seriously beached the ideology of gender roles - dominant forms of masculinity and femininity are unchallenged.

However, there seems to be some ambiguity within the SADF on the behaviour required by gender and military roles. According to one informant, "social conduct in the army should not be different to that we were brought up with. I expect to pour the tea and have men stand aside for me. But if we have a military parade, the general walks in front." (Interview, 1989).

The presence of women in the SADF does not appear to have eroded gender stereotypes in the minds of male SADF soldiers. "... the most startling thing was that Permanent Force women were despised. We were told that if you looked at a PF woman you must be 'hard up' or 'too lazy to masturbate'." (Interview with SADF conscript, 1990).

On the contrary, definitions of masculinity are mobilised in military training to turn men into soldiers. Many men in the SADF were coerced into fighting in Angola, Namibia and the townships to defend an image of social order of "home and hearth" that was symbolised by women. Military combat training uses woman-hating as part of its method to turn men into soldiers, a process in which the individual must learn to dehumanise other people and make them into targets.

Recruits who were not up to standard were often labelled as "faggots" or "homos" or "moffies". They were told to "go back to your mummies and play with the girls". Women were mostly referred to as "pieces of meat". (Interview with SADF conscripts, 1990).

The situation in MK is very different. Unlike the SADF, the ANC is committed to the emancipation of women as part of the elimination of all forms of oppression and injustice. The "armed struggle" was launched by the ANC in 1961 as a response to increasing state violence and the shrinking space for non-violent political activity. By the end of 1987, MK had trained more than 12,000 guerrillas since the 1976 uprising. (Barrell, 1990). These included women as well as men.

MK has always been open to women though the numbers of women cadres has increased dramatically since 1976. At the time of the ANC's unbanning, women constituted approximately 20% of cadres in MK. While in the SADF there is a rigid separation of men and women both in training and deployment, in MK men and women trained side by side. Women cadres received exactly the same political and military training as the men cadres and were involved in an extensive range of tasks from physical fitness, obstacle courses, communication, engineering, tactics, map reading and instruction in the use of weapons and explosives.

Our chores and daily routine was the same. We dug trenches, did guard duty, shared cooking and washing - everybody did their own washing. We all did the same things and ate the same food. We did lots of physical exercises so we all had beautiful bodies. (Interview with woman MK cadre, 1988)

I was frequently told that the outcome of this integrated training was that the presence of competent and confident women was felt in a wide range of departments within MK. I was often told that this helped to overcome feelings of inferiority on the part of women cadres and sexist attitudes on the part of men cadres.

Cadres forgot that you are a woman ... they see you as a soldier. We used to go on three day marches together during which time we'd only eat condensed milk and water. The fact that we could endure these conditions earned men's respect and gave us women confidence. (Interview with MK woman cadre, 1990)

The male comrades respected us for having the courage to be soldiers. (Interview with MK woman cadre, 1989)

Both men and women informants spoke of how women cadres demonstrated this courage in their participation in numerous MK activities.

Women were used a lot of decoys and couriers ... they were used a lot to smuggle in arms and explosives. (Interview with male MK cadre, 1989)

They were also deployed in intelligence, communications, transport, medical services and

logistics. They were not deployed in combat but of course the conceptions and experiences of "combat" were very different from that in the SADF, and MK saw little combat of the conventional kind.

According to one MK informant, "There is both a broad and a narrow aspect of combat. First of all it involves building all forces that will be involved in implementing armed action. Then there is the narrow aspect involving military action, shoot outs, attacks and so on." (Interview 1991)

According to Mtintso (1992):

Very few women 'made it' in terms of being sent into the country to do combat work. Those who did, or who were in forward areas, were given supportive roles to men. For example, they would house the soldiers, transport them, be couriers, or do reconnaissance work. (p. 18)

After training most women went into secretarial roles. They got stuck in offices ... we felt angry about this. We felt women should be used in combat. Women are protected. The boers were looking for men. (Interview with MK woman cadre 1991)

It is difficult to be definitive about the significance of women's exclusion from traditional combat roles in MK. The notion of "combat" is problematic. This is true in a conventional war because of changes in military technology, and it is also true of a revolutionary war that does not involve direct confrontation with the enemy and where the boundaries between "front" and "rear" cannot be sharply demarcated. There is no doubt that women have played an important and courageous part in MK activities. Undoubtedly the nature of the struggle and the breakdown of normal male-female roles encouraged many women to discover new capacities within themselves. While MK is sometimes dismissed as a "phantom army" its ideological presence among the masses is considerable and individual MK soldiers are heroized. The female MK guerrilla has become a popular mass image of the strong, liberated woman.

However, the exclusion of women from combat may be significant given that the experience and tradition of actual combat with the enemy is an important ingredient in

MK's prestige. It meant that no women participated in the Wankie campaign in 1967 (a joint MK-ZAPU infiltration mounted from Zambia across the Zambezi into Rhodesia). It also means that no women participated directly in any of the famous MK actions that are now the subject of township myth - the actions such as the Goch Street shootout led by Solomon Mashalangu, or the spectacular rocket attack on Sasol in June 1980. The word 'directly' is important because women's extensive deployment as couriers meant that they contributed significantly to these actions.

In South Africa black women have provided much of the infrastructure of resistance. Apart from women directly incorporated into MK, women have acted as couriers, provided intelligence and given refuge. Through rent and consumer boycotts it was often women who gave resistance its mass character.

According to Jackie Molefe, "There should be more women in the commanding structures of MK. There are many capable women in MK, but most top positions are occupied by men". (Interview 1990)

Many women in both MK and the SADF see themselves as pioneers for women's rights, breaking down formidable sexist barriers.

On the whole women's reasons for joining either of the two armies are vastly different, though notions of "patriotism" enter into both sets of ideological motivations. Certainly for many women joining the SADF, the opportunities for "career" training are important. While the SADF offered social mobility and the opportunity of individual advancement - particularly for Afrikaner girls - MK demanded the sacrifice of exile and a life of hardship and danger.

Women soldiers in both armies described themselves as patriots. In the case of MK the notion of "patriotism" was more emotionally charged. Many were impelled by anger over the police shootings of Soweto 1976 or anger about their own lives and material deprivation. Several MK informants were the children of domestic workers who described seeing little of their mothers who were required to live at their place of work and were not allowed visitors. In their minds the institution of domestic service served as a model of the

inequality on which the entire society was structured.

Whereas several SADF women informants identified conflict between their domestic and occupational roles as a source of strain, several MK informants linked their political and domestic roles. For example Thandi Modise was termed "the knitting needles guerrilla". She was termed this because while she was operating underground as an MK cadre reconnoitring potential military targets she tried to look as ordinary as possible and carried a handbag from which a pair of knitting needles protruded. I interviewed her shortly after she was released after serving an eight year prison sentence. She said:

I'm a guerrilla because I'm a mother. Some people have accused me of being an unnatural mother but I did it for her (her daughter). It's better to leave your child and fight. I'm very pleased my children will never turn around to me and ask, 'Why did you do nothing?' We have to have a better South Africa for our children. I do it for the children ... all the children.
(Interview 1991)

Another young MK cadre said: "I had to go out there to try and save my family. I was very worried about my two young brothers". (Interview 1991)

A young woman who spent one and a half years in a training camp in Angola (at one time she was the only woman in the camp of 300 people) said, "I only came to get a gun When it was hard we reminded ourselves of the SAP and the SADF. We knew we had to be as tough as them." (Interview 1991)

Jackie Molefe believes that the integration of women in armies is a crucial means of achieving gender equality.

In the army people come to respect each other. It's only in the army that I've seen equality practised. In terms of endurance and discipline women have been outstanding in MK. Because of that, because of what we've been doing on the ground we've been recognised as equals. (Interview 1990)

However, MK training may be the only social space in which this recognition of equality is a reality.

In both the SADF and MK there was a horizontal and vertical sexual division of labour. However, in the conventional army of the SADF where women's subordination and subservience to men was generally unchallenged, the role of women seems to have been extended rather than fundamentally reworked. In the revolutionary army of MK, women were incorporated into new roles.

In both armies there was some emphasis on political education. While the SADF has always operated to defend the status quo and thus to maintain both white and male supremacy, MK has always operated as freedom fighters, as an army of liberation with the question of women's liberation explicitly on the agenda. The issue of women's emancipation figured explicitly in political education within MK, though according to one male MK informant, "most of the guys didn't take it very seriously".

While a great deal of emphasis is given within the SADF to maintaining a hierarchical ideology of gender roles and to cultivating a subordinate and decorative notion of femininity, the egalitarian ideology of MK sometimes involved a denial of femininity that at least one informant found irksome.

My femininity is important to me. The other struggle is keeping my weight down. I enjoy clothes. When I was in the camps wearing a khaki uniform and doing physical exercises I was very strong and fit. But I sometimes used to look at myself in the mirror and wonder. (Interview with MK woman 1987)

The crucial question is whether the experience of shared training in MK eroded the traditional gender stereotypes. The issue of sexual harassment would appear to be one way of testing the extent to which men's attitudes changed regarding women as sexual objects to cadres, and also the extent to which women themselves raised the issue. Widely different answers emerged on the issue of sexual harassment within MK. The general pattern in interviews was to deny this, but according to one internal discussion document: "invariably all women were 'proposed' to on a daily basis Most of us know cases of male comrades who have even raped or attempted rape of women and have not been disciplined".

According to another informant: "There was some sexism in the camps. It mostly came out of a kind of protectionism. The men tried to protect us from long stretches of guard duty for instance". (Interview with MK woman 1991)

Another said: "The men cadres were very protective. The men's protective attitude pushed me. MK men expected women to be docile and subservient". (Interview with MK woman 1989)

Of course within the SADF the problem was non-existent in training because of the rigid segregation of the sexes.

I think it follows from the pattern in both MK and the SADF that the South African case does not unambiguously support Judith Stiehm's (1982) observation that, "Women's participation in the military has failed to challenge traditional and very basic sexist ideologies". (p. 371)

However, the complexity of the issue is apparent in two examples of women's exclusion from current restructuring.

Women's Exclusion from Current Restructuring

We are a critical time in South Africa's history. We are engaged in creating an entirely new and different societal process which our most famous novelist, Nadine Gordimer has called "one of the most extraordinary events in world social history" (Public address, 1990).

It seems certain that there is a very reactionary element within the SADF and the SAP who are intent on disrupting this process of dismantling apartheid, who are bent on the destabilisation, the weakening of the ANC and the disruption of the current negotiations. Since 1990 the ANC has frequently claimed that these security elements, referred to as a "third force", were engaged in such a covert, clandestine campaign that involved committing acts of terror - such as random attacks on train commuters which has involved 226 deaths in the past 20 months, assassinating ANC leaders, training and arming Inkatha members and fuelling violence between different African groups such as township

residents and hostel inmates. (Incidentally this is often referred to as "black on black" violence, a notion which has as much explanatory force as describing World War II as an example of "white on white" violence.)

In response, it was resolved at the ANC 1991 conference that MK should "act in the defence of the people" against "third force violence" by operating and training para-military "self-defence units" answerable to local civic structures.

These self-defence units operate very unevenly throughout the country. In some communities they are strong but I know of no area where women participate on an equal basis to men.

Despite women's significant role in MK, despite the widespread image of the MK guerrilla as "the liberated woman", in these defence units women are being pushed back into the roles of "the protected" and "defended". This re-instatement of traditional gender ideology is clear in two ways:

- (i) the total exclusion of women from membership of the self defence units, and/or
- (ii) their subjection to "curfews" imposed by the male members.

In the Mapetla area of Soweto, for example, membership of the defence units is restricted to men. (Xeketwane, 1991). However, Xeketwane reports that women in this area play important indirect roles, "such as transportation of arms from outside Soweto ... and providing food". (p. 71) Femininity is a useful camouflage. "Two or more smartly dressed women in one car heavily loaded with weapons are used to smuggle the weapons into Soweto." (p. 71)

Another area where there has been a good deal of political violence and where the defence units are strong, is the so-called "squatter camp" of Phola Park, with a population of approximately 45,000 people largely unemployed and living in overcrowded conditions without any basic amenities. No women have been incorporated into the defence units. Instead, there is a curfew and women (along with children) have been instructed by defence units to stay home after 6 p.m.

In South Africa at present a debate is beginning about the process of creating a legitimate and representative defence force. This process reflects all the political difficulties involved in the transition to a non-racial democratic order in South Africa. Our central task is to create a common society; to create institutions which unify rather than divide us. A new, representative and legitimate defence force could play an important role in this process of social integration.

Our vision of a new army is that it would not be made up of technicians of violence but rather controllers of violence, controllers of the type of violence that might attempt to overthrow a duly elected government.

To date, in this debate, there has been no mention of women. A number of statements by leaders of both MK and the SADF reveal clearly that they conceptualise the process in purely masculine terms.

The process is fraught with difficulties. The difference between MK and the SADF in force and skill levels and equipment is vast. MK is a comparatively small and ill-equipped guerrilla-type army. It is sometimes referred to contemptuously as a "phantom army", but what it lacks in manpower and material resources is offset by its powerful ideological presence. While the prestige of MK is incredibly high it is at present a very fractured institution with its members dispersed into three categories - those inside South Africa in underground structures, about 3,000 in camps in Uganda and Tanzania and a third category undergoing training in various overseas countries.

Since 1990 hundreds of MK recruits have been sent abroad to receive training in regular warfare. In July 1991 the MK Chief of Staff, Chris Hani, said that MK was in the process of being transformed into a conventional army. "Only a professional army will be competent to man [sic] a future democratic order. MK is preparing to be part of this". (The Weekly Mail, 5/7/1991). Tokyo Sexwale, the MK commander and Head of ANC special projects, has emphasized the urgency and importance of this task of "upgrading and recruiting of MK soldiers" in preparation for this professional army. "We have 15 different armies running around South Africa. If we don't integrate them soon there will be carnage here - a bloody civil war". (The Weekly Mail, 5/7/1991). another MK official,

Calvin Kahn has stated that, "We are training a regular army in order to participate fully in the new army of a future South Africa ...". (The Sowetan, 15/10/1991). To date no woman has been involved in such training. It follows that women will not be equipped to participate fully in the new army.

The experience of Namibia is sometimes cited as a positive example of how previously warring armies can be integrated into a new national defence force. But the experience of Namibia is disturbing in relation to women. According to Cleaver and Wallace (1991) women and men had equal status in PLAN as part of SWAPO's policy of equality for women (p. 15). Women constituted a significant proportion of PLAN fighters and this should be reflected in the formation of the newly integrated Namibian Defence Force. However, it has been reported that although the projected force levels of this new army are low, numbering about 5,000, no woman has been incorporated. (*The Namibian*, 26/4/1990)

So what can we conclude from the South African experience? Does the participation of women in armies serve the cause of equal rights by demonstrating women's strength and competence? Does it create new models of womanhood? Do these models endure? Or does the participation of women in war mean that a male-forged identity and violent style is homogenised and spread more widely. As Elshtain (1987) has queried, does the insistence on equal access to all military roles function to reinforce "the military as an institution and militarism as an ideology" by perpetuating "the notion that the military is so central to the entire social order that it is only when women gain access to its core that they can hope to fulfill their hopes and aspirations". (p. 239)

The Debate on the Relation between Feminism and Militarism

"I am not going to advise women to turn their distaff into a musket though I sincerely wish to see the bayonet converted into a pruning hook". (Wollstonecraft, 1792:219).

In *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) Mary Wollstonecraft raised a question that - 200 years later - is logically at the cutting edge of contemporary feminism. She argued for equal rights for women, but emphasised that this did not imply their equal right

to bear arms. She assumed that the vocation of motherhood exempted women from arms bearing.

However, the reality is that during this century women have increasingly been incorporated into the armed forces worldwide. This trend is related to a number of factors such as changes in the nature of war because of different technologies and military organisation; decreasing birth rates in the developed world; increased labour force participation rates among women, changing attitudes about gender roles, and lastly, the women's liberation movement.

The ideology of this movement - feminism - is complex, varied and contains contradictory perspectives. Analytically, a feminist perspective recognises gender as a significant social relation which structures our social experience so that women have distinctive and specific experiences. Of course, gender is not the only or even the most significant social relation which shapes the social world. Especially in South Africa it is impossible to overlook the importance of class, race and ethnicity.

In South Africa, politically, feminism is splintered by deep divisions. There is a widespread suspicion of feminism as bourgeois and divisive, as essentially concerned with entrenching and extending privilege.

In South Africa there is a danger of "right-wing feminism" - right-wing feminism involves women joining the existing masculine hierarchy and cultivating a masculine sense of self. This variant of feminism has been stripped of its revolutionary potential - it does nothing to challenge the status quo.

In the ANC generally, while there is a strong commitment to equal rights, feminism is discredited. According to Mtintso (1992) within MK,

there were no feminist positions argued because most soldiers viewed feminism in the negative sense, namely, that strand of feminism which sees men as the main enemy ... the word feminist had a derogatory meaning. Even now, it is not yet understood, not only in the ANC but also in Africa generally. There is no understanding that there are various trends in feminism There is still no uniform understanding in the ANC Women's League of feminism and the content of women's emancipation. There is still

talk of 'we as mothers and wives'. To me this is indicative of the problem.
(p. 19)

The "problem" looms even larger when it comes to practice. According to another informant, "ANC men understand the emancipation of women theoretically but they can't practice it". (Interview 1991)

A distrust of "feminism" is often true in a third world context where issues of survival are paramount. As Kimble and Unterhalter (1982) write,

women of the ex-colonial world have seen much of the substance of (feminist) struggles as irrelevant to them. Women struggling to liberate themselves from the burden of oppression of imperialism - a burden which manifests itself in extreme ways through poverty, disease, genocide - appear to find little point of comparison between their own goals and the concerns of Western women. For them, Western women represent a privileged, middle-class elite, fighting for sectarian aims, while women in national liberation struggles are fighting on behalf of their whole people. (p. 12)

The notion of "equal rights for women" has had an important place in many national liberation struggles. This is true of the South African struggle and in our context "equal rights for women" is a revolutionary call. The idea is thus quite different to the liberal variant of feminism in Europe and North America which is essentially conservative and concerned with equality between men and women within the existing order. In a third world context this "revolutionary feminism" is frequently militarist. It asserts women's equal right with men to take up arms against oppression and injustice.

In South Africa there is a widespread acceptance of the legitimacy of the armed struggle led by MK and the notion of a "just war". This, linked to the commitment to "equal rights for women" means that the Western connection between feminism and pacifism is loosened in the South African context. No thread of strong, well-articulated pacifist-feminism has emerged from my interviews. In fact, the female soldier, the MK guerrilla, is a popular image of the strong, liberated woman.

However, in the global context it could be argued that confirming the image of the woman soldier as the model of the liberated woman is deeply reactionary.

In the USA, the Women's Research and Education Institute reports some key "firsts" about military women as:

- in 1989 a double first: two women commanded army companies in the Panama invasion,
- over 800 army women participated in the invasion of Panama,
- in 1983, 170 army women participated in the invasion of Grenada.

But the question must be posed: are these "firsts" in the sense of honourable achievements which represent progress for women, or a shameful record of women's participation in criminal activities and imperialist invasions? What about the 33,000 American women who served in the Gulf War? Was this an honourable war or a shameful "massacre"?

It has frequently been argued that militarism is the root cause of women's oppression. It has also been asserted that militarist and feminist values are antithetical. "Masculinity" is said to be associated with the patriarchal values of dominance, power, aggression and violence. By contrast feminist values are said to be peace, caring, sensitivity, justice and equality. For some these qualities are innate, but for others they are a product of different patterns of gender socialisation.

Military training is a crucial agency of this socialisation. Men are socialised into a conception of masculinity that is violent. As Roberts (1984) has pointed out "Military training is socialisation into masculinity carried to extremes". (p. 197) The notion of "combat" is the fulcrum of this process.

"Combat" is the key dimension in the development of the masculinity/militarism nexus. Combat is presented as fundamental to the development of manhood and male superiority (Enloe, 1983). Only in combat lies the ultimate test of a man's masculinity. Of course the notion of "combat" is an increasingly ambiguous one. Combat exclusion laws in the US fail to take account of changes in the nature of warfare which have blurred distinctions between combat and non-combat roles, as well as the demarcation of "front" and "rear". The laws clearly do not correspond to the reality of current military doctrine which

include a fluid frontline with first strikes deep into the previously safe rear to knock out supply lines. The laws are meaningless given the highly technological nature of modern warfare - a characteristic exemplified in the precision bombing of the Gulf War and the exchange of Scud and Patriot missiles. However, as Enloe (1983) pointed out, the myth of combat dies hard.

The image of manhood inculcated through combat training hinges on aggression and dominance. Through combat the man affirms his role as protector and defender. In this sense the exclusion of women from combat roles is essential for maintaining the ideological structure of patriarchy. Therefore there is said to be a necessary connection between feminism and anti-militarism.

The increasing incorporation of women into armies worldwide, together with their exclusion from combat roles and decision-making, raises important questions for those who are opposed to both sexism and militarism.

The connection between the two was best articulated by the pacifist-feminist writer, Virginia Woolf. One of her concerns was how to uncouple masculinity from militarism. As she expressed it: "How can we alter the crest and spur of the fighting cock?" Her question is as relevant today as when she posed it sixty years ago.

References

Barrell, Howard. (1990). *MK: The ANC's Armed Struggle*. Johannesburg: Penguin.

Cock, Jacklyn. (1989) In *Society at War. The militarisation of South Africa*. Jacklyn Cock and Laurie Nathan (eds). New York: St. Martins Press.

Cleaver, Tessa and Marion Wallace. (1991). *Namibia: Women in war*. London: Zed Books.

Enloe, Cynthia. (1983) *Does Khaki Become You? The militarization of women's lives*. Boston: South End Press.

Elshtain, Jean (1987). *Women and War*. New York: Basic Books.

Gordon, Linda. (1987) "Nazi Feminists?" *Feminist Review*, 27: 35-38.

Kimble, Judy and Elaine Unterhalter. (1982) "ANC Women's Struggle 1912 -1982".
Feminist Review, 19:287-299.

Koonz, Claudia. (1987). *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the family and Nazi politics*.
New York: St. Martins Press.

Mtintso, Tenjiwe. (1992). "Women in MK". *Work in Progress*, 80: 28-35.

Roberts, Barbara. (1984) "The Death of Macho-think: Feminine research and the
transformation of peace studies". *Women's Studies International Forum*, 7: 195-200.

Wollstonecraft, Mary. (1792) (1967 ed.) *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*.
Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Xeketwane, Babylon. (1991) "The War on the Reef: A case study of political violence in
the Mapetla area of Soweto". BA Honours Dissertation, University of the Witwatersrand.

Yuval-Davis, Nira. (1985) "Front and Rear: The sexual division of labour in the Israeli
army". *Feminist Studies*, 2:649-676.

[Home](#) | [Programmes](#) | [Research](#) | [Consultancy](#) | [Coming Events](#) |
[Staff](#) | [Internships](#) | [Annual Report](#) | [Background](#) |
[Aims](#) | [Links](#)

