

Women and Children: Deconstructing a Paradigm

by Nadine Puechguirbal

When do women gain from being treated as 'mother,' 'dependents,' or 'vulnerable,' and when from being seen as autonomous individuals?

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INTRODUCTION

Women and children are the main victims of modern warfare, and they account for an estimated 80 percent of refugees and displaced persons worldwide.² Women and children bear the brunt of armed conflicts when they lose protection, shelter, access to food, and medical care. Wars also upset gender roles and increase the responsibilities and exposure of women when they have to strive to feed their children and extended families in the absence of the male breadwinner. In the existing literature on the subject of conflict and post-conflict situations, women are often associated with children. In international instruments, UN resolutions or documentations, women are always part of the vulnerable groups together with old people, children and the handicapped; they are always dependent on a family unit or a male individual, either father, brother or husband. It is as if women did not have an identity of their own. It is as if they could not play an accepted and recognized role in society when they are not associated with children.

A new category of human beings is produced, called "women-and-children," with children just being an extension of women's own body and soul. This way of thinking perpetuates the stereotypes of women as caring and nurturing mothers, locked in the private realm, unable to cross boundaries and move to the public arena, where men are designing policies, taking decisions and running the world. In the framework of changes brought about by armed conflicts, this article will challenge the paradigm that associates women with children; it will demonstrate that it prevents women from being seen as active agents of change for peace, or actors of their own lives, thus limiting their participation in the reconstruction or rehabilitation of societies.

Because women are caught in productive, reproductive and community works, they have less time available for participating in development programmes or capacity-building training that can lead to their empowerment. And all over the world, women

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are excluded from decision-making processes, peace talks, or important international gatherings that define new societies on the remains of war. Post-war situations very often mean for women the return to the status quo ante bellum, to alienating traditions that define them in their role as a good mother and a good wife, irrespective of the new responsibilities they may have taken during armed conflicts. As Meintjes, Pillay and Turshen write, “The historical record confirms that societies neither defend the spaces women create during struggle nor acknowledge the ingenious ways in which women bear new and additional responsibilities.”³

WOMEN-AND-CHILDREN: LOOKING FOR LANGUAGE IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Women’s political activity has been generally restricted to the grassroots level within a community or a movement far away from the centers of power dominated by men. Until challenged by feminist perspectives, international relations had always been defined according to the masculine norm of reference, built up on gender hierarchies and on the binary visions of ‘private sphere versus public’ and ‘nature versus culture’ that have excluded women from power circles and decision making levels. In international relations literature dealing with armed conflicts, what is at stake is the definition of men (the protectors) versus women (the protected) who have little control over their own protection. As Ann Tickner writes, “while men have been associated with defending the state and advancing its international interests as soldiers as diplomats, women have typically been engaged in the *ordering* and *comforting* roles both in the domestic sphere, as mothers and basic needs providers, and in the caring professions, as teachers, nurses, and social workers.”⁴

The paradigm that associates women with children prevents women from being seen as active agents of change for peace.

Following a massive mobilization of women from all walks of life, the UN Security Council passed resolution 1325 on October 31, 2000, thus paving the way for a new definition of the position of women in conflict and post-conflict situations. For the first time in the UN history, the Security Council turned its attention to the issue of women in wars not only as victims but mainly as agents and actors in conflict prevention, conflict resolution and peace building. It also acknowledged the need to support women’s peace initiatives as well as their involvement in peace processes, and called for an increase in the representation of women at decision-making levels. Resolution 1325 has been called a landmark resolution because it represents a great step forward in acknowledging the active contribution of women in peace and security issues; thus, it gives them a role they never had before in international relations. Indeed, in most of the resolutions adopted by either the UN General Assembly or the Security Council, women have often been seen as hopeless

civilians, always associated with children, who suffer from the consequences of wars. As Sara Poehlman and Felicity Hill write, “women are seen as victims that need to be protected and helped, instead of participants in their own protection or in the struggles for peace, self-determination, national liberation, and independence.”⁵ One example of such a language can be found in General Assembly Resolution 2200A, on the protection of Women and Children in Emergency and Armed Conflict from December 16, 1966, which reads: “expressing its deep concern over the sufferings of *women and children* belonging to the civilian population... who are too often victims of inhuman acts.”⁶ A pattern can be clearly identified in the language used by the UN to talk about the situations of women that is closer to victimization than empowerment. Even today, after years of increased awareness and mobilization of women, the language has not fundamentally changed, thus perpetuating the stereotypes that prevent women from becoming more visible and assertive in the public arena.

In October 2003, the UN Office of the Special Advisor on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women (OSAGI) conducted an analysis of 264 reports by the Secretary-General to the Security Council from January 2000 to September 2003. The analysis shows that although 17.8 percent of the reports make several references to gender concerns, 15.2 percent make little reference and 67 percent make no or only one mention of gender issues or women. As highlighted in the OSAGI study, “the vast majority of reports citing gender concerns mention the impact of the conflict on women and girls, primarily as victims of conflict—not as potential dynamic actors in reconciliation, peace building or post-conflict reconstruction.”⁷

Of course, there has been some improvement in the language used in the different documents from the UN since the adoption of resolution 1325. For example, resolution 1325 is now integrated into the language pertaining to women, peace and security, like in resolution 1493 for the peacekeeping mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In resolution 1493 indeed, the Security Council “reaffirms the importance of a gender perspective in peacekeeping operations in accordance with resolution 1325 (2000)...”⁸ Despite this, stereotypes about women resurface, and the category *women-and-children* takes over as illustrated in resolution 1470 on the peacekeeping mission in Sierra Leone. In resolution 1470, the Security Council “encourages the Government of Sierra Leone to pay special attention to the needs of *women and children* affected by war...”⁹ Another example can be found in resolution 1379 on Children and Armed Conflict, as follows: the Security Council expresses its intention, where appropriate, to call upon the parties to a conflict to make special arrangements to meet the protection and assistance requirements of *women, children*, and other vulnerable groups...¹⁰

If we take a closer look at how news is reported about humanitarian action all over the world and pay attention to language, we can take up the same thread again. As reported by the Integrated Regional Information Network (IRIN) on February 10, 2004, in an article about the humanitarian assistance provided by the European Community, “the aid would also be used to reduce mortality and morbidity among

the refugees, internally displaced people (IDPs), returnees, *women and children*.”¹¹ In another article one can read, “the refugees, mostly *women, children* and the elderly, have spread widely in pockets in Chad...”¹² Or, “in addition, the civilian population, especially *women and children* [...] continues to be subjected to serious and systematic human rights violations...”¹³

This line of analysis could continue and provide more examples following this identified pattern. The argument of this article does not diminish the importance of protection issues for women and for children in times of war; it rather stresses the need for a revision of the language that would encompass women’s coping strategies with violence and hardship conditions, document their lives in conflict and post-conflict situations, and highlight what actions they are taking in the field of protection to better target our international involvement. This approach would enable women to move from the status of victims to that of actors.

Women can have access to resources, but if they do not have control over these resources, they remain dependent.

The problem with the traditional approach is that often the reality on the ground is not clearly understood because of a lack of gender-disaggregated data. Most humanitarian agencies report about people, groups, populations, and communities as if they were the same entities with the same needs, irrespective of the gender dimensions of each society. For example, we read in the Consolidated Appeal Process (CAP) for Liberia in 2004 that “80 percent of Liberians live below the poverty line; and 35 percent are undernourished.”¹⁴ This data does not tell us what groups are affected the most among these people, and what strategy and resources will reach them. In the same document, we read that “only 25 percent of people have access to safe water. A vast majority of people are illiterate.” If these statistics were broken down by gender and age, we could better target the humanitarian assistance according to the needs of the different groups. (Are women more illiterate than men? What does it tell us about this particular group? Do girls go to school? If not, what are the obstacles and how can they be tackled?) Without a clear picture of the reality in the field, and with broad categories of beneficiaries like *women-and-children*, it is difficult to devise a clear strategy of humanitarian assistance that would use local resources and empower the recipients. The result is that women are often disempowered and marginalized in the delivery of international assistance; and, one wonders why their situation as refugee, single head of household or widow keeps deteriorating in spite of all the help they can get. They end up being over assisted instead of being empowered. Women can have access to resources, but if they do not have control over these resources, they remain dependent on a male relative or a community that may deprive them of their rights.

WOMEN-AND-CHILDREN: LOOKING FOR A PATTERN IN HISTORY

From all over the world, history tells us that the ordeal of a woman starts when she becomes dependent on a family entity and is subservient to the patriarchal rule that prevents her from escaping her fate and asserting her rights as a free and independent individual. As Rosalind Miles writes, "...a woman who is not locked into that chain of command between her husband and his children is a dangerous threat to the stability of the society, and to herself."¹⁵ The anthropologist Nicole-Claude Mathieu further explains that by focusing too much on the mother as "lieu psycho-biologique" (psycho-biological entity) for the child, one forgets to define the woman as a social subject: she is only thought of as an object rather than the subject of maternity.¹⁶

Furthermore, the writer Elizabeth Badinter shows that the patriarchal system, which enforces the binary vision of a strict sexual division of labor and imposes the rule and power of the "father," starts in the West with the Athenian democracy in the fifth century B.C.¹⁷ Although this ideology will be weakened by the evolution of mentalities, revolutions, wars, and the development of a feminist consciousness, it has left scars in today's societies that often prevent women from getting out of traditional roles and being recognized as independent individuals in the public sphere. Carole Pateman writes, "as capitalism and its specific form of sexual as well as class division of labour developed, however, wives were pushed into a few, low-status areas of employment or kept out of economic life altogether, relegated to their 'natural,' dependent, place in the private, familial sphere."¹⁸

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Of course, women are a heterogeneous group with different needs and expectations and they are divided by class, race, age, religion, and background. However, they all share one common identity: as women, they are always identified as mothers. As Adrienne Rich writes, "it is as if the suffering of the mother, the primary identification of woman as the mother—were so necessary to the emotional grounding of human society that the mitigation, or removal, of that suffering that identification, must be fought at every level, including the level of refusing to question it at all."¹⁹ A woman who has not given birth is not a real woman, and she is often stigmatized if she stays single without children.

According to the popular beliefs in pre-colonial Rwanda, single women were considered dangerous spirits (*muzimu*), in the same way as the deceased without descendants or people who died far away from their families and were refused burial.²⁰ As a comparison, during the Middle-Ages in Europe, the woman was the

property of her husband and her father, only protected by law in her capacity as a mother. As underlined by Simone de Beauvoir, “the murder of a pregnant woman costs four times more than the murder of a free man; a woman who has shown that she could be pregnant is worth three times more than a free man; but she loses her value when she becomes sterile.”²¹

In Somalia, two parties in conflict use a form of negotiation that is called the *dayeh* (blood money); the *dayeh* for a woman is half the *dayeh* for a man. However, if a pregnant woman is killed, or if her fetus dies, then the *dayeh* for the fetus is equivalent to the *dayeh* of a male adult.²² In addition, we often talk of the involvement of Somali women in conflict resolution by stressing the fact that women are exchanged between enemy tribes as a way of sealing a peace accord. Once again, the woman is seen in her role of mother exclusively since this exchange will translate into a happy ending when she gives birth, as illustrated in the Somali saying: “*meel xiniijir lagu bururiyay xab baa lagu bururiya*”²³ (a baby should be born in the spot where blood has been spilt). Here again, we see a pattern taking shape in many societies that define the woman as a minor who is dependent of the good will of her clan, family, husband or father and can not enjoy an autonomous life. It seems that the history of the living conditions of women sheds light on this pattern of dependence as Simone de Beauvoir explains: “since the oppression of woman has its roots in the need to perpetuate family and maintain intact the patrimony, whenever she leaves the family entity, she also loses this absolute dependency.”²⁴

During armed conflicts, the gap in gender roles deepens and women are defined according to the most conservative norms of the society.

Not only are women primarily defined as mothers, but they only get legitimacy if they have children within the structure of the family entity, always sanctioned by marriage. For example, in the traditional society in Rwanda, a girl becomes a burden for her family if she becomes pregnant (unmarried mother), a widow or when she was repudiated. The family used to call such a girl an “*Indushyi*,” which means a “hopeless and miserable” girl. A small cabin was built for her close to the property of her parents, and she had to fend for herself to make a living.²⁵ The family entity has been defined as the “natural” norm of the society; and, according to the expression used by Carole Pateman, “the family is paradigmatically private.”²⁶ It has even been enshrined in international instruments like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) which, in its article 16, point 3, states that “the family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State.”²⁷ *Family* at that time was certainly defined as the nuclear heterosexual family without much room for interpretation. Even today, in many countries, family remains the so-called natural entity of the society grounded on the traditional sexual division of labor.

We have seen that Rwanda has revised its Constitution and mainstreamed gender issues throughout its text; but here again Article 27 refers to the family as the natural entity of the Rwandese society. We understand that Rwandese women had to fight hard to remove the discriminatory elements against women that existed in the Constitution; they have used international instruments, including the Universal Declaration, to ground their claims for a more egalitarian society. One may further question the language of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which, in article 1, states that “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of *brotherhood*.”²⁸ The word “brotherhood” does not reflect the perspectives of women and girls who remain invisible individuals with rights.

CHALLENGING THE CATEGORY *WOMEN-AND-CHILDREN*

One of the main problems in associating women and children in international relations is that it feeds the nationalist discourse that defines women mainly as the cultural bearers of a society. When the interpenetration between people and nation becomes stronger, relations between women and men are essentialized and defined according to what is a “natural” role or duty for a group or the other. In times of war, women are reminded that they are the keepers of the home, traditionally and biologically, and that they have to transmit to their offspring the values of their culture; the men, traditionally and biologically, are responsible for protecting women and children, as well as the *motherland*, thus highlighting the commonly agreed definition of masculinity that is prone to violence and aggressiveness. Elizabeth Ferris reports that in Serbia in the 1990s, women were manipulated by the nationalist propaganda to support the war efforts. She gives the example of a politician who was haranguing women about giving birth to a son who would serve for the nation. She writes further that another politician had said that for each male combatant who fell on the battlefield during the war against Slovenia in June 1991, it was the duty of Serbian women to give birth to 100 more boys.²⁹

During armed conflicts, the gap in gender roles deepens and women are defined according to the most conservative norms of the society, mainly as mother and wife of the male heroes. She loses her own space and identity to take over the identity of a society that is shattered by the war; thus, she becomes dependent on the ultra-nationalist politics of a militarized society that makes her a symbol of purity and a tool for the ideological reconquest of traditional values and norms. Gender roles become very polarized while the concept of masculinity and its complementary object femininity are overemphasized. As Cynthia Enloe writes, “militarized masculinity is a model of masculinity that is especially likely to be imagined as requiring a feminine complement that excludes women from full and assertive participation in postwar public life.”³⁰

Gender markers in wars are so strictly reinforced that women are particularly exposed to sexual violence: “women’s bodies constitute the battlefield where men

communicate their rage to other men.”³¹ We remember the armed conflicts in Bosnia and Rwanda where rape was used as a weapon of war, not only to humiliate women but also reach the men of another ethnic group and deliver the message that they were unable to protect their women. As Jennifer Turpin writes, “because women are viewed as symbols of the family, and the family as the basis of society, the humiliation for women of giving birth to the enemy’s children symbolizes the destruction of the community.”³² Therefore, the use of a language that defines women first and foremost in their reproductive role participates in making them more vulnerable and somehow jeopardizes their lives by anchoring a conservative vision of gender roles in the mind of the people. During the genocide in Rwanda in 1994, women were raped, abducted to serve as sexual slaves, maimed and/or killed. According to the anthropologist Christopher Taylor, it is impossible to apprehend the Rwandan genocide without understanding the link between gender roles and power within a militarized society. He explains that, already in the 1980s, a brutal campaign had been launched in Rwanda against single urban women in the framework of reforms aimed at fighting against loose morals; the main targets were young women living in urban areas who were going around with Europeans or were wearing fancy clothes. They were very often humiliated by soldiers in the middle of the street and some of them were even locked in reformatories located in rural areas. Most of these women were very beautiful Tutsi. The most lasting consequence of this repression was to instill into Rwandese minds that single Tutsi women were all prostitutes, thus unleashing a great violence against them that culminated during the genocide in 1994.³³

Women’s resort to violence should be seen not as an exception but rather as a way to survive in extreme circumstances.

In a related development, the *women-and-children* approach prevents us from giving women an alternative gender role or an “agency,” if chosen to build the framework of an identity that is not defined in subordination to male power. Women have participated in wars as combatants and committed acts of violence. Talking about the involvement of women in the genocide in Rwanda, Carolyn Nordstrom writes, “there is a shared concept across cultures that women don’t do this kind of thing... society doesn’t yet have a way to talk about it, because it violates all our concepts of what women are.”³⁴ This position reinforces the dichotomy of gender roles by excluding women from the public arena where war is conducted and post-war negotiations take place. As Ann Tickner underlines it, “but if the implication of this view [that women are first and foremost caring and nurturing mothers] was that women were disqualified from participating in the corrupt world of political and economic power by virtue of their moral superiority, the result could only be the perpetuation of male dominance.”³⁵ This is echoed by Judy El-Bushra when she

writes that women's resort to violence should be seen not as an exception but rather as a way to survive in extreme circumstances, thus blurring strict and static definitions of gender identities.³⁶

Even mothers can become violent as illustrated by Ruth Roach Pierson in the case of Nicaragua. She explains how the involvement of women in the Sandinist movement had its roots in the way they were perceived in the society both as mothers and victims. The Nicaraguan women first got involved in the Sandinist movement because, as mothers, they couldn't stand watching their children being killed by the Somoza's regime. Then, they took up arms to fight against their own vulnerability linked to rape that was systematically used by Somoza's National Guard. After the civil war, those women continued the fight against the machismo that was deeply rooted in the Nicaraguan society.³⁷

Unless women's presence is imposed by the international community, they are not invited to participate in peace talks, and their concerns and priorities are not taken into consideration.

In a militarized environment where concepts of masculinity and femininity are so loaded, it becomes very uneasy to promote peace through a "motherist" movement or what is called the philosophy of "maternal thinking." As Cynthia Cockburn observes, "identifications as mothers can enlist generous feelings of care and love that powerfully contradict violence. But it skirts dangerously close to patriarchal definitions of women's role and can be co-opted by nationalisms propagating that very ideology."³⁸ This approach is echoed by Joshua Goldstein who stresses that women are not more peaceful than men simply because they are women. By continuing to emphasizing their role as nurturers and caretakers, we reinforce the stereotypes that prevail during wars. Joshua Goldstein explains that by feminizing the peace, women activists often endorse the soldier's masculinity.³⁹

The contribution to peace building by committed women's peace groups throughout the world is undeniable. However, because they are associated with the private realm, the activities they carry out for peace are only seen as an extension of their domestic chores and not taken seriously. As Michael Fleshman writes in the context of Africa, "[...] the contributions of women peacemakers in Africa, from Somalia to South Africa, have gone largely unnoticed. Dismissed by governments and rebel movements who consider making war and peace to be men's work—and often relegated to the role of "victims" by well-intentioned diplomats and aid agencies—women have had to fight their own battles for a seat at the peace table."⁴⁰

Indeed, women may have been very active in the promotion of peace at the grassroots level, very often they fall short of reaching the official negotiations table in peace processes. Actually, unless their presence is imposed by the international

community, they are not invited to participate in peace talks, and their concerns and priorities are not taken into consideration when decisions are made about the post-conflict reconstruction of their own society.

The writer Adrienne Rich doesn't believe that women's peace groups promoting "maternity" in their antimilitarist work can help have an impact on society in the long run. As she writes, "I do not see the mother with her child as either more morally credible or more morally capable than any other woman. A child can be used as a symbolic credential, a sentimental object, a badge of self-righteousness. I question the implicit belief that only "mothers" with "children of their own" have a real stake in the future of humanity."⁴¹ We need to start dissociating women from children to break the vicious circle of the essentialism theory and deconstruct gender roles so that women are seen as active individuals who can enjoy independent choices over their own life. Finally, we will agree with Ann Tickner when she cautions, "many contemporary feminists see dangers in the continuation of these essentializing myths that can only result in the perpetuation of women's subordination and reinforce dualisms that serve to make men more powerful. The association of femininity with peace lends support to an idealized masculinity that depends on constructing women as passive victims in need of protection."⁴²

CONCLUSION

This paper is provocative on purpose with the aim of thinking outside the box. We acknowledge that a lot of progress has been made in recent years to reinforce the protection of women, children and other groups that may be particularly exposed to the cruelty of wars. International laws have been passed, people have mobilized, rape has been finally recognized as a war crime and a crime against humanity, and women have taken the lead in promoting their own protection needs, but impunity still prevails. As Charlotte Lindsey from the International Committee of the Red Cross writes, "if women have to bear so many of the tragic effects of armed conflict, it is not primarily because of any shortcomings in the rules protecting them, but because those rules are not observed."⁴³

Maybe we could suggest that women would be better protected if they were seen as autonomous actors in charge of their own lives, thus being in a position of asserting their own rights and fighting back. Maybe we should start with deconstructing gender roles in post-conflict situations and challenging the static definition of masculinity and femininity, thus redefining power relations and addressing gender inequality. Women should be seen as dynamic actors beyond the limited borders of a biological destiny. As Chris Dolan writes, "if anything, given that the coming of peace will be associated with opportunities for civilian men to reclaim their masculinity, we should not be surprised to find ostensibly empowered women pushed back into the kitchen within a very short period. Interventions that hope to secure women's emancipation must also ensure that men have alternative sources of domestic and political power and credibility beyond a position as husband and father."⁴⁴

Because we look often at women's issues in isolation from men, we undermine the importance of power relations that have an impact on the definition of gender roles. If we look at the relations between men and women through gender lenses, we understand that gender roles are socially constructed and can change over time within cultures. That's why it would be better to change language and talk about gender perspectives instead of using fossilized categories like *women-and-children* in order to have a better picture of the social and political flux within societies. We have to stop thinking of women as defined according to a "biological fate" (anatomy as destiny), as Simone de Beauvoir would say, as well as being socially apprehended according to what they are (passive) and not to what they do (active). As Elizabeth Badinter writes, "by associating woman with maternal capacity, one defines her according to what she is and not to what she wants to be. On the contrary, there is no symmetrical definition for man who is always apprehended according to what he does and not to what he is. Resorting to biology affects only women."⁴⁵

Notes

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- ⁶ Resolution 2200A on the protection of Women and Children in Emergency and Armed Conflict from 16 December 1966. Emphasis ours.
- ⁷ Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women (OSAGI), *An analysis of the gender content of Secretary-General's reports to the Security Council, January 2000-September 2003*, United Nations, October 2003, p. 1.
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