ONE

Women’s Wars Are Not Men’s Wars

Svitlana was wearing her warmest parka. She had her iPhone securely tucked into her jeans pocket and a knapsack on her back, containing her Ukrainian passport, snacks, laptop, two chargers, tampons, extra sweaters for the children and the few family photos she could grab in haste as they fled. Her youngest child was holding tightly to her right hand. Thank goodness she was now old enough to walk. With her left hand, Svitlana pulled a roller bag filled with clothes for what might be weeks, possibly months, away. Her eight-year-old daughter, trying not to lose sight of her mother and little sister on the crowded Kyiv train platform, was carrying her brightly colored school bag. Svitlana’s own mother wouldn’t leave her own farming village. It was her home, she explained, even if Russian missiles were destroying its houses and silos. Instead, she insisted Svitlana should take her granddaughters to safety. Svitlana and her partner, her daughters’ father, had said their rushed goodbyes outside the station, each avoiding mentioning her lost job or his deployment to the eastern front, reassuring each other they would phone and text daily. For now, Svitlana had become a single parent, a single wartime parent.

On a Warsaw train platform that same day, Agnieszka was working with volunteer women drivers. As Ukrainian refugee women had begun to pour into Poland, Agnieszka and other Polish feminists had become alarmed at the prospect of sex traffickers seizing on the chaotic conditions to masquerade as welcomers in order to abduct
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girls and women. Painfully aware of the shared conservative stance toward women by their own populist government and Catholic clergy, Polish feminists had quickly organized volunteer women drivers to provide safe transport to the frightened, exhausted Ukrainian women and their children soon to disembark from the trains.

Both women were trying to think, strategize and take action at the outbreak of a war. Their conditions were not identical, but both had to navigate complex gendered expectations with unequal gendered resources.

At the outbreak of the same war . . .

Alexandra had been too young to join Pussy Riot in their earlier outrageous public performances designed to challenge the Russian government’s political alliance with the socially conservative Russian Orthodox clergy. But she had admired their courage. In the wake of the Putin regime’s military invasion of Ukraine, Alexandra decided it was her turn to act. Bundled up in her winter coat, she joined others on the streets of St Petersburg in late February. She was politically cautious enough not to mention by name the man whose imperial dreams she opposed. She just held up her hand-painted sign: “No to War!” The security forces’ brutal response to their peaceful demonstration shocked her. She dropped her sign and ran. Afterwards, talking privately with her twenty-something women friends, all of whom had come of age in post-Cold War Russia, she wondered aloud what kind of future her country held for her.

Lepa had survived her own violent war. A life-long resident of Belgrade, the 1990s bloody conflict had shattered her former country into ethnically charged, post-war Balkan autocratic states. With other local activists, Lepa had spent the Yugoslav War organizing a rape crisis center and feminist anti-war protests, defying the masculinized Serbian political elite’s efforts to fuel popular militarized nationalism. When the latest regional conflagration erupted, Lepa’s immediate response was to re-commit herself to feminist anti-militarism. But that was not the sentiment that she was hearing from some of her Ukrainian feminist colleagues. They told her that they wanted weapons, heavy weapons. Was sending artillery the new form of transnational feminist solidarity?
Alexandra and Lepa, living their gendered lives in wartime Russia and post-war Serbia, were determined to put the lessons they had learned from feminism to work in their own wartime activism. What that meant in practice for each woman was not immediately obvious.

Continents away, the same war was reshaping other women’s lives . . .

Climate change had deepened the drought, making Evelyne’s work all the more stressful. As a Kenyan staff member of a grassroots organization, she was working to empower rural Kenyan girls and women. Food insecurity was not an abstract concept to Evelyne. She witnessed how, even as women were chiefly responsible for supplying water and firewood and preparing food for their families, the conventional privileging of boys and men translated into fewer calories consumed by girls and women. Drought had only worsened those inequities. Now came the new shortages of imported grain on which Kenyans depended. Evelyne hadn’t had much reason to think about Ukraine. When she thought about war, she thought about the conflicts in neighboring Somalia and Sudan, which for years had sent refugee women and their dependent children fleeing into Kenya. Today, though, she listened closely to the BBC reports explaining how the Russian military invasion of Ukraine was a principal cause of global grain shortages in African countries such as Kenya. Food insecurity, Evelyne knew, soon would become even more acute for rural girls and women.

At first, Lucile wasn’t sure she should feel happy about landing a job with an arms manufacturer. Her nephew was in the army, but she never had been a military cheerleader. She did know, however, that, as an African American woman and single mother trying to make a decent living in Orlando, Florida, she should be pleased that she wasn’t working in the region’s Disney World-dominated tourist industry, where wages were low and racialized sexism rife. Still, did working for Raytheon match her personal values? Then the war in Ukraine began making headlines. Lucile started to feel pride in the weapons she was helping to produce: Javelin anti-tank missiles. She heard Javelins celebrated on the evening news. There was even a meme making the rounds on social media, “Saint Javelin,” who looked
a bit like the Madonna. Lucile wondered if being a skilled wiring technician in a factory producing Javelins connected her to Ukrainian women.

One war, intersecting countless women’s lives, a global web of gendered politics.

Most descriptions of war blot out complex gender dynamics: war is so bloody that gender doesn’t matter. Or wartime strategic calculations are portrayed as so bloodless that gender politics are irrelevant.

There is a third wartime narrative. It features women. It is billed as “human interest,” a story or a photograph intended to make a complex violent conflict – in Syria, Ethiopia, Myanmar, Ukraine – understandable to distracted viewers. The women featured are usually crying. They are crying over the dead body of a husband or son. Or they are standing stunned in front of rubble that was their home. Rarely are they portrayed as having full lives. Even more rarely are they interviewed and asked for their ideas about the war. Displaced women grieve over fallen men and lost homes. That is presumed to be the chief role for women in war. Their wartime feminine tears convey the editors’ message. Too often, we, the viewers, absorb that simplistic message.

Feminists among us, however, have learned that in the midst of both massacres and elite strategizing, it is crucial to stay curious about the full range of women’s gritty wartime lived realities. By “crucial,” women’s advocates mean that attentiveness to diverse women’s lives and ideas is essential if we are to accurately understand the causes of war, the dynamics in waging war and the prolonged consequences of war.

Put more boldly, feminists from scores of countries, including our own, have taught us that if we don’t pay careful attention to women, all sorts of women, we won’t be realistic about war. We will mistake the causes of war; we will be superficial in our descriptions of how wars are waged – and we are bound to woefully undercount the true costs of war.
All three errors are dangerous. Perpetuating those errors makes the outbreak of a next war more likely.

Becoming feminist in our attentiveness does not require us to claim that the politics of gender explain everything. Though, to be honest, on the darkest days the effects of militarized masculinities do seem to explain a lot of what is deadly, wasteful and unjust. In calmer moments, what feminists from scores of countries — that is, all of us together — have learned from each other is that when we pay serious attention to diverse women and girls, we are less likely to shrink them down into mere passive sobbing wartime victims or, just as risky, blow them up into unreal super-heroines.

Our collective feminist lesson: shrinking or inflating either women or ideas about femininity will make us dangerously unrealistic about war.

By staying attentive to the complex, multi-layered lives of women and girls, we are more likely to see how war-wagers strategically wield certain ideas about femininity — the “real woman,” “the good woman”, “the patriotic woman,” “the fallen woman,” “the traitorous woman” — in order to stoke militarism among both women and men. Stoking distorted ideas about femininities fuels and perpetuates wars.

By paying attention to all kinds of women, we begin to see men-as-men — in men’s own class, sexual, racial and political (often rival) diversities. That awareness enables us to assess when and how distorted ideas about manliness — “the good buddy,” “the warrior,” “the fallen hero,” “the coward,” “the brilliant strategist,” “the scientific genius” — are manipulated to promote and justify war.

Women’s wars are not men’s wars. Start with marriage. Laws and practices of heterosexual marriage in most societies impose different roles during wartime: a husband is expected to act differently in a
war than is his wife; in some societies, a husband is expected to leave his family and take up arms; under those same laws, his wife cannot sell property or travel without her husband's consent. Or take parenting. Women's wars are not men's wars because the laws and practices of parenting in most countries impose different roles: a mother is presumed to have greater responsibilities for children in wartime than does a father, even though she may need her husband's consent to take her children to safety.

Food and hunger are gendered even in patriarchal peacetime. It's not simply that in most households women are responsible for gathering food and cooking it for their families. Women also are expected not to eat as much as men in their households because it is men who are the chief income earners. Women in many societies eat last and consume fewer calories and nutritionally less protein. When wartime exacerbates food scarcity, the caloric inequalities between women and men widen.

Family structure shapes women's wars. Woman-headed households – conventionally defined as those households without an able-bodied, working-age adult male – are more likely to be poor than are households headed by an adult male. Thus, when thinking about women's wars, it is useful to know that, in 2020, on the brink of the Russian invasion, a remarkable 50% of households in Ukraine were woman-headed. That same year in Nigeria, 18% of households were headed by women; in Colombia, 36%; in Ethiopia, 22%.¹

Women's wars are not the same as men's wars because it is women – and girls – who can become pregnant during any war. Currently, women in Ukraine have broad legal access to contraception and abortions. Just next door, however, Polish women's rights activists have mounted public demonstrations to protest their rightwing populist government expanding bans on abortions. Facing a disastrous drought on top of outbreak of civil war, women in Ethiopia in 2022 have won legal access to abortion, but in practice face limited reproductive healthcare in part because of the imposition of US foreign aid restrictions.²

Women's wars are not men's wars, moreover, because in most countries women's work – in factories, in services and, importantly,
in farming – is more likely to be unpaid than men’s work. If women
do acquire paid jobs, their labor is valued less and paid less than
men’s work.3

During wartime, women are expected to take on added unpaid
labor – to keep the farm going with fewer workers and less equipment,
to care for children and elderly relatives, to feed the household despite
food and fuel shortages. By contrast, men in wartime have to be paid
for their work: even patriotic men won’t fight for nothing. Weapons
manufacturing expands to meet war-wagers’ needs. Many weapons
factories today are highly masculinized, though women can be found
on the assembly line, especially in the wiring departments, or as
clerical workers. For those women, well-paid jobs with Lockheed
Martin, BAE, Raytheon, Mitsubishi or Saab can be tickets to economic
security in peacetime.4 During wartime women gain access to more
paid jobs, as men are drawn from the civilian economy into fighting
forces, however, it is usually presumed that they will hold those paid
jobs only “for the duration,” until the men come home to retake
those jobs. “Women returning to the kitchen” is often taken to be a
sign that peace has been re-established.

Similarly, in wartime, the sexual needs of men, married or unmar-
rried, are often imagined to be different from the sexual needs of
women, married or unmarried: it is a male soldier, not a female
soldier, on leave after weeks deployed who is excused, even encour-
aged, by his male superiors when he seeks out a brothel full of women
who may be trafficked from another disaster zone or are doing sex
work by apparent “choice” in order to feed their children.

As feminists, we have learned always to explore the gendered
politics of militarized prostitution.5 It is likely that it will be the
woman, not the man in her household, who is drawn or pushed into
wartime prostitution (called “survival sex” by some humanitarian aid
workers) to earn income. Then it will be her post-war social status
that will be tainted if the word gets out about how she economically
supported her children during the war. Her male client’s masculinized
social standing is likely to go unscathed.

Marriage, family, work, property, food, violence, sexuality, child-
care, income, reproductive health, prostitution: each is shaped by