

# The Gendered Impact of War

Sociologists for Women in Society Social Action Committee Fact Sheet

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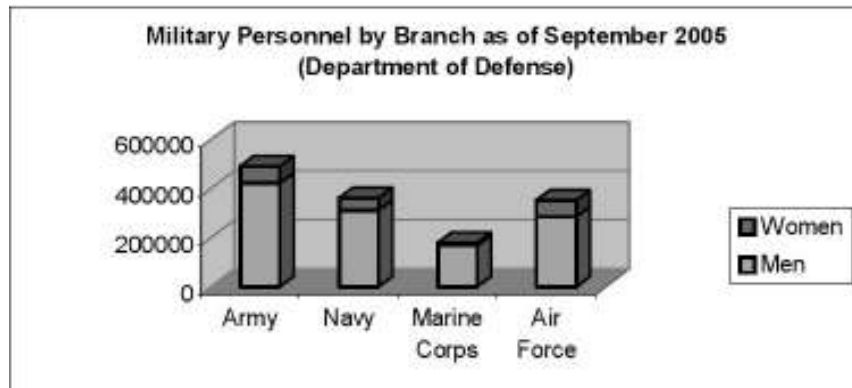
War, like all institutions, is highly gendered. The gendered experience of war depends on many factors including individual's or country's global position, the type of war and their role in war. For most, the idea of war, or at least battles, brings to mind images of young men engaged in violent conflict. Women have, however, been central to military actions throughout the history of warfare in their roles as wives and mothers, as nurses and administrators and increasingly as soldiers. While men hold the majority of military and decision-making positions, women have historically provided essential support for the waging of war and maintenance of military. Women as mothers have provided the birth and care of future soldiers and support for enlisted men. Women as wives have provided food, clothing, sexual and emotional support on the battlefield. In military bases, women provide much of the social services for the base community (Enloe 2000a: 72). Women as civilians have moved into work forces to fill jobs left by enlisted men central to the continued war economy. Women have served as prostitutes through both official and unofficial channels to military men serving in foreign bases. Women are captured, raped, become refugees, become widows and die in combat.

The myriad ways in which women have supported war are intimately tied to hegemonic gender norms. Dominant cultural notions of femininity construct women as nurturing and loving and inherently more peaceful than men. Hegemonic gender norms promote the idea that men are responsible for protecting their countries and families and women are responsible for supporting and helping their men. While these norms are not universal, and are the object of challenges throughout the world, they are insidious and they guide much of both men and women's actions and roles in war. As Sara Ruddick, U.S. philosopher, asserts, "I believe that everyday maternal thinking contrasts as a whole with military thinking" (150). As a result of these ideas about gender and war, in most cases, women are excluded from participating directly in combat. Paradoxically, the support women provide to war-making efforts has served as a powerful source of legitimacy for wars. The logic is: If women who are naturally more peaceful support the war then clearly the war is justified. Governments have regularly leveraged this legitimacy to increase popular support for war. Women have also leveraged the perception of their natural peacefulness to powerfully challenge wars. Despite its intermittent nature, war affects all aspects of both military and civilian life. The effects are extensive and varied. The following sections highlight a few central facts about women in the military, women as victims, and women as challengers of war. The references provide opportunities to explore the myriad gendered implications of war.

## Women in the Military

Women have been part of military forces throughout history. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, women have entered militaries throughout the world in large numbers. In World War II, the Soviet Union recruited childless women into the military beginning in 1942. They primarily served as nurses and anti-aircraft units. By the end of the war, approximately 800,000 women served in the Soviet military during World War II, 8% of the total Soviet forces (Goldstein 2001: 65). Women have also taken active combat roles through membership in guerrilla armies including the Sandinistas of Nicaragua, the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka and in Iraq (Ibid 81-83). Despite having mandatory service for both men and women, Israel also excludes women from combat positions (Ibid 87).

In the U.S., women have been informally part of the military throughout the country's history. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, women have increasingly become a formal part of the U.S. military in a range of support positions. 13,000 women enlisted in the U.S. Navy (Ibid: 88) in World War I. In World War II, women joined the military as WACs (Women's Army Corps) and WAVES (U.S. Navy Women's Corp) and through the Army Nurse Corps. Today, women compose 14.6% of the U.S. military. Despite the long term integration of women in the military, women continue to be excluded from combat positions.

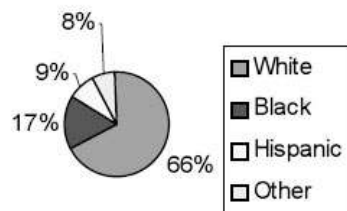


**Percent of Women in the U.S. Military as of September 2005 (Department of Defense)**

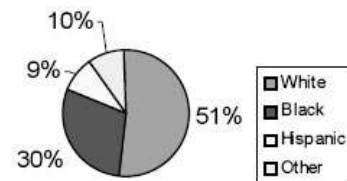
Overall Enlistment 14.6%  
 Officers 15.3%  
 Top Four Officer Ranks 4.9%

In addition to being excluded from combat positions, women also remain underrepresented in the highest military ranks of Generals and Admirals. Women are most integrated into the Army and Air Force and least integrated into the Marine Corps. At least in the past several decades, one of the roles of the military in the U.S. has been to provide economic and educational opportunities for the economically disadvantaged. Thus, the U.S. military is a particularly racially diverse institution. This diversity is even more pronounced among women. As the following charts show, only 51% of women in the armed forces are white (compared with 66% of men in the military and 67% nationwide).

**Ethnic Distribution of Active-Duty Men in U.S. Military (all branches) 2004**



**Ethnic Distribution of Active-Duty Women in U.S. Military (all branches) 2004**



**Victims of War**

While men may dominate the waging of combat, both men and women are victims of war. An estimated 70-75% of the casualties in recent conflicts were non-combatants compared with fewer than 5% in World War I (UNIFEM 2006, Women's Commission 2006:6). In addition to risks of death through combat and bombing, women are victims of war in several gender specific ways including death of husband and children, decreased economic viability, sexual assault and rape, displacement into refugee status and prostitution.

Women bear the majority of the responsibility for maintaining households and communities when men are away fighting war. In wars with high levels of mortality, women often lose their husbands and grown children. In addition to the emotional cost of such losses, there is a dramatic economic cost causing many women to bear the entire economic responsibility for their household. This effect is magnified when many men are drawn from a village in a warring country. Women end up with the economic responsibility for the survival of their family, village and community. In many instances, however, women are not simply

left behind in times of war. Instead, they find themselves and their children becoming refugees, forced to flee their hometowns and villages to save their lives. As of August 10, 2006, the U.N. estimated that 915,000 people in Lebanon, a quarter of the population, were forced to leave their homes due to the conflict between Israel and Hezbollah. Women and children in refugee camps face a host of gender specific dangers including gender-based violence, being forced into prostitution, poor access to reproductive health care and discontinued education (Women's Commission 2006).

**Estimated Number of Women  
Victims of Rape or Sexual Assault  
(UNIFEM)**

Rwanda 500,000

Bosnia-Herzegovina 60,000

Sierra Leone 64,000

One of the universal ways that women are uniquely victimized by war is through sexual assault and rape. While individual soldiers may rape both civilians and fellow soldiers, some armies have used rape as a systematic tool of war with the intent of terrorizing a population, shaming men to break military morale and promoting ethnic genocide, among other motivations. For example, German women were raped by Soviet Forces in large numbers during the final years of World War II (Enloe 2000b:108). In the 1970s in Chile, the Pinochet regime systematically used rape of women as part of their formal state torture plan to punish dissidents (Ibid: 129). In Rwanda (1994) rape had a specific ethnic genocide purpose with Tutsi women being raped by Hutu men (Ibid: 132) as a formal attack on the Tutsi enemy. Similarly, during the war in the former Yugoslavia (1992-1995) Serbian forces systematically raped Bosnian women of Muslim and Croat origin in Bosnia. The systematic use of rape against Bosnian women prompted human rights and women's rights activists to call for bringing the perpetrators to trial in the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia. Those trials the Contra War engaging in a propaganda campaign to mobilize women as mothers to protect their country by supporting military action and through "combative motherhood" as "armed protection of the nation's children" (de Volo:246 in Women & War Reader). The cultural conception of women as protectors of children has also been used by women peace activists to challenge war and governmental policy. In some cases, motherhood has served women activists as the only safe means to protest. Las Madres de La Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, for example, began meeting in the Plaza de Mayo to demand information about their disappeared family members during Argentina's "Dirty War" of the 1970s and 80s. Las Madres manipulated the cultural idea of women's peacefulness and maternal concern to organize protests in an environment where dissent was immediately suppressed through arrest and torture. Their model has been reproduced in countries throughout the world.

Women peace activists often use maternalist language to frame their opposition to war and attract supporters. Women have also consistently mobilized in opposition to war as concerned citizens and feminists. In 1915, a group of international women's activists, including Jane Addams, founded WILPF (Women's International League for Peace and Freedom) to protest World War I. WILPF along with other women's peace groups continued to mobilize against militarism in the Cold War and War in Vietnam through today. Women's groups founded peace camps and organized mass actions like the Women's Strike for Peace, which called for a "strike" on domestic labor in protest against nuclear war preparations (1961) (York in Women & War Reader).

We call on women around the world to rise up and oppose the war in Iraq. We call on mothers, grandmothers, sisters, and daughters, on workers, students, teachers, healers, artists, writers, singers, poets and every ordinary outraged woman willing to be outrageous for peace. Women have been the guardians of life—not because we are better or purer or more innately nurturing than men, but because the men have busied themselves making war. Because of our responsibility to the next generation, because of our own love for our families and communities and this country that we are a part of, we understand the love of a mother in Iraq for her children and the driving desire of that child for life. —Starhawk (Code Pink Founding Statement)

The current "War on Terrorism" and war in Iraq have again caused women throughout the world to mobilize in opposition to war. Like many of the groups in earlier decades, contemporary women's peace groups often draw on hegemonic models of femininity that represent women as

fundamentally peaceful to challenge the legitimacy of war. One of the largest contemporary women's peace groups to organize against war in Iraq is Code Pink. Code Pink was founded in 2002 by a group of feminist and global justice activists committed to mobilizing women against the war in Iraq. Code Pink has worked with WILPF, Women in Black, Gold Star Families for Peace and countless other women's peace and women's rights groups to challenge the legitimacy of war in Iraq and work to bring an end to the war.

### **Organizations**

Amnesty International: [www.amnesty.org](http://www.amnesty.org)

Code Pink: [www.codepink4peace.org](http://www.codepink4peace.org)

Doctors Without Borders: [www.msf.org](http://www.msf.org)

Gold Star Families for Peace: [www.gsfp.org](http://www.gsfp.org)

International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia: [www.un.org/icty/](http://www.un.org/icty/)

United Nations Development Program: [www.undp.org](http://www.undp.org)

UNIFEM: [www.unifem.org](http://www.unifem.org)

Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children: [www.womenscommission.org](http://www.womenscommission.org)

Women in Black: [www.womeninblack.net](http://www.womeninblack.net)

Women's International League for Peace and Freedom: [www.wilpf.org](http://www.wilpf.org).

### **Books**

Enloe, Cynthia. 2000a. *Bananas, Beaches and Bases*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Enloe, Cynthia. 2000b. *Maneuvers*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Goldstein, Joshua. 2001. *War and Gender*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Norman, Elizabeth M. 1999. *We Band of Angels: The Untold Story of American Nurses Trapped on Bataan by the Japanese*.

New York: Pocket Books.

Ruddick, Sara. 1989. *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*. New York: Random House.

Saywell, Shelley. 1985. *Women in War: First-Hand Accounts from World War II to El Salvador*.

New York: Viking.

Skaine, Rosemarie. 1999. *Women at War: Gender Issues of Americans in Combat*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland &

Company, Inc. Publishers.

### **Edited Volumes**

Grimsley, Mark and Clifford J. Rogers. 2002. *Civilians in the Path of War*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Lorentzen, Lois Ann and Jennifer Turpin. 1998. *The Women & War Reader*. New York: New York University Press.

Stiglmayer, Alexandra. 1994. *The War Against Women in Bosnia-Herzegovina*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

#### **Fiction**

Arnold, Harriet. 2003 [1954]. *The Dollmaker*. New York: Harper Perennial.

Brittain, Vera. 1933. *Testament of Youth*. New York: Penguin Books.

Ondaatje, Michael. 1992. *The English Patient*. New York: Knopf.

### **Reports**

Amnesty International. 2006. "Women & War: Stop Violence Against Women"

[www.amnesty.org/resources/flash/svaw/conflict/eng/](http://www.amnesty.org/resources/flash/svaw/conflict/eng/).

Department of Defense. 2005. "Active Duty Military Personnel by Rank/Grade."

<http://siadapp.dior.whs.mil/personnel/MILITARY/rg0309f.pdf>.

Office of Army Demographics. 2004. <http://www.armygl.army.mil/hr/demographics.asp>.

UNIFEM. 2006. "Crimes against Women in War and Armed Conflict".

[www.unifem.org/gender\\_issues/violence\\_against\\_women/fact\\_figures.php](http://www.unifem.org/gender_issues/violence_against_women/fact_figures.php)

UNIFEM. 2005. "Securing the Peace: Guiding the International Community towards Women's Effective

Participation throughout Peace Processes”.

UNIFEM. 2004. “Women, Peace and Security: UNIFEM Supporting Implementation of Security Council Resolution 1325”

Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children. 2006. “Displaced Women and Girls at Risk”

[www.womenscommission.org/pdf/WomRisk.pdf](http://www.womenscommission.org/pdf/WomRisk.pdf).

### **Teaching Resources**

Women in World War II: <http://www.archives.state.al.us/teacher/ww2/lesson3/index.html>

Women in Iraq War (I): [http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/teachers/lessonplans/iraq/women\\_4-2.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/teachers/lessonplans/iraq/women_4-2.html)

“No More Tears Sister”: <http://www.pbs.org/pov/pov2006/nomoretears/for.html>

### **Films and Videos**

“G.I. Jane” (1997): Hollywood film starring Demi Moore as a female lieutenant who struggles against discrimination and a difficult training routine to make it into the elite Navy SEALs.

“The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter” (1980): Documentary on women’s participation in the workforce during World War II in the U.S.

“Maria’s Story” (1991): True story of a 39-year-old mother of three who was a leader in the guerrilla movement in El Salvador.

Filmakers Library.

“No More Tears Sister” (2006): POV documentary about the personal story of woman in Sri Lanka’s experiences with the Tamil Tigers and later human rights activism. PBS.

“Rising Above: Women of Vietnam” (1996): This film shows the military participation of Vietnam women in the Vietnam war and follows the lives of five of those women in the decades since the end of the conflict. Bullfrog Films.