

THE COST OF IGNORING GENDER IN CONFLICT AND POST-CONFLICT SITUATIONS: A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

Nadine Puechguirbal *

Abstract

This article focuses on the cost of ignoring gender when analysing conflict and post-conflict environments. It explains how a feminist perspective allows us to uncover hidden gender power relations and deconstruct the so-called gender-neutral approach in international relations. By highlighting the differential impact of war on women and men regarding security issues, it is understood that the cessation of hostility is not always synonymous with peace for women. It is also understood how patriarchy resurfaces after a war and marginalises women who are mainly seen as powerless victims and sidelined in peace talks that promote a conservative return to the *status quo ante bellum*.

“A key task of feminist analysis is to extend the scope of the agenda rather than to answer questions about what is already on the agenda.”¹

Introduction

War is gendered.² Because they occupy different roles and assume different responsibilities in times of peace, women and men experience war with a gender-based perspective. Women and men can be civilians, combatants, at the same time victims and actors; however, in spite of well-documented literature³ on the multiple roles that women play in times of war, the international community continues to frame them in strict gender roles that perpetuate stereotypes and reinforce inequalities in post-conflict situations. Women are sidelined in peace talks and negotiations because of a strict division of labour that reassigns traditional roles and responsibilities to women and men in the reconstruction process.

* Nadine Puechguirbal has a PhD in Political Sciences from the University of La Sorbonne, Paris, France. She is a Visiting Professor at the UN-affiliated University for Peace (UPEACE) in Costa Rica where she teaches for the Master on Gender and Peace building. She has worked as a Senior Gender Advisor for the United Nations and the International Committee of the Red Cross.

¹ A. Tickner, *Gendering World Politics*, New York: Columbia University Press 2001, p. 29.

² J. Goldstein, *War and Gender, How Gender Shapes the War System and Vice Versa*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2001.

³ See, for example: M. Turshen and C. Twagiramariya, *What Women Do in Wartime, Gender and Conflict in Africa*, London & New York: Zed Books, 1998; E. Rhen & E. Johnson Sirleaf, *Women war peace, Progress of the World's Women 2002*, volume 1, New York: UNIFEM 2002.

Time and time again, women are labelled victims and put in the category of vulnerable people together with children, irrespective of the increasing responsibilities they take over in the absence of men. A military manhood is promoted for the protection of women who are defined as powerless individuals. As a result, women are rarely invited to participate in peace processes because they are not seen as essential key players; this situation allows a gender hierarchy to continue to prevail in the post-conflict phase. At the same time, peace is feminised and skills women can bring to the reconstruction process are defined within an essentialist realm with the aim of “preserving the social order”, thus maintaining women in a pre-war pattern of caregivers and providers.⁴

In this article the biases that still prevail in international relations in tackling conflict and post-conflict situations - where women’s contributions to peace and security issues are systematically marginalised - are discussed. Using gender as a lens for exposing ‘hidden power relations’,⁵ we will take stock of preconceived ideas that prevail in international politics and that maintain a patriarchal system. A feminist perspective allows prevailing norms and attitudes towards issues relating to women, peace and security to be challenged and allows the deconstruction of patriarchy and related hegemonic masculinity.

I. A ‘Gender-Blind’ Approach

International relations continue to make women’s experiences of war invisible because it is not deemed relevant to the debate around peace and security issues. A feminist perspective that draws attention to gender hierarchies allows us to deconstruct a ‘gender-blind’ approach that perpetuates the discriminations against women already in place in times of peace. Making the variety of women’s experiences visible and documented allows us to stop taking men’s experiences and privileges for granted. Adopting a feminist approach to international relations requires that we pay attention to silences, to what is not said in forums and around the peace table, to what is missing to get a complete and an all-inclusive picture of reality: “Masculinity is not a gender, it is the norm because gendered institutions, discourse and research present themselves as gender-neutral or gender-equal: look for gender where gender is claimed as absent.”⁶ A feminist perspective searches for a reality that is overlooked in the traditional approach of international relations; it helps to deconstruct the gender subordination that has been naturalised in discourses, behaviours and cultural symbols.

⁴ L. Shepherd, *Gender, Violence and Security*, London & New York: Zed Books 2008, p. 90.

⁵ C. Carpenter, *Innocent Women and Children, Gender, Norms and the Protection of Civilians*, Hampshire: Ashgate 2006, p. 5.

⁶ L. Sjoberg & C. Gentry, *Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Women’s Violence in Global Politics*, London & New York: Zed Books 2007, p. 175.

The practice of international politics is based on gender inequalities. Adopting a feminist perspective is to reveal how gender is embedded in international relations and to create a space to make those inequalities visible. Such a perspective challenges a binary vision about what is defined as 'feminine values' versus 'masculine values', the latter being used as a universal reference to which everything is compared and appreciated. It breaks down gender dichotomy and aims to deconstruct gendered social and political norms. It rejects stereotyped ways of thinking about war and peace by exposing myths of a masculinised war and a feminine peace.⁷

Former President Clinton's special assistant for African affairs, Donald Steinberg, participated in the 1994 signing of the Lusaka Protocol that put an end to the civilian war between the government and the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA).⁸ Asked about the participation of women in the peace process, Steinberg replied with confidence that the Lusaka agreement was 'gender-neutral', thus not discriminating against women. However, as he later explained: "It took me only a few weeks after my arrival in Luanda to realise that a peace agreement that is 'gender-neutral' is, by definition, discriminatory against women and thus far less likely to be successful."⁹

First, Steinberg realised that not a single woman had a seat on the Luanda-based Joint Commission responsible for implementing the peace accords; secondly, the Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration programme for former combatants was designed for men and did not take into account the needs of women and girls who had been kidnapped by rebel forces and used as sexual slaves, cooks, messengers, etc. At the same time, male ex-combatants were sent back to their communities without adequate psychosocial support, job/skills training, and soon they sank into alcohol consumption and drug abuse that exposed women to more violence. Nobody paid attention to the fact that the men's failure to reclaim their masculinity after the conflict would have a severe impact on the women's own sense of security.

This example clearly shows that a so-called 'gender-neutral' agreement rests on men's perspectives of war and peace and overlooks women's needs as well as expectations in the post-conflict phase. In addition, it illustrates how the negotiations for peace are maintained in the hands of the men who fought the war and who became the new peacemakers even if they had committed violations of women's rights during the conflict. The lack of accountability within a patriarchal system allows the perpetuation of impunity. In March

⁷ Tickner 2001, *supra* note 1, pp. 60-61.

⁸ D. Steinberg, 'Failing to Empower Women Peacebuilders: A Cautionary Tale from Angola', *PeaceWomen E-News*, 25 April 2007, page 1, at: http://www.peacewomen.org/assets/file/Resources/NGO/gissue_hr_part_failingtoempowerwomenpeacebuildersangola_international_crisis_group_2007.pdf.

⁹ *Idem*, p. 1.

2009, the international community welcomed the peace agreement between the government of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and the rebellion of the National Congress for the Defence of the People (CNDP). This agreement provided for the Congolese government's promulgation of a law of amnesty for the former rebels. The part the rebels of the CNDP played in acts of sexual violence against women and girls had been well-documented in various reports by human rights organisations. However, instead of being held accountable for those acts, the rebels were invited to negotiate a peace accord and women's rights were, once again, sacrificed for the sake of a so-called peace (one may want to ask: peace for whom?).

Sure enough, "insecurity that is male on male (for instance, armed militias fighting each other) is more detrimental to political stability and stable governments than male on female violence is."¹⁰ This explains why governments, with the back-up of the international community, are willing to promote a very masculine definition of security. They so are anxious to neutralise armed groups, be they rebels or militia, so as to avoid a new outbreak of violence that could jeopardise their holding of power, that they do not see the fight against impunity as relevant at this stage. Violence against women is not a threat to men in power although they do not realise the impact it will have on the post-conflict society in the long run and how it will prevent the creation of sustainable peace. For women indeed, peace is not just the absence of war. Problem is, since women are not considered actors within their own communities, they are not empowered on the international scene and their participation is put on the back burner when peace talks begin. Their own perspectives on peace and conflict resolution, linked to security issues, are dismissed as irrelevant and not essential to political and peace negotiations that will prepare the future of their society. Although they are the backbone of families and communities, women are represented by men in national, regional and international arenas, and they have no choice but to lay their fate in the hands of male elders, leaders or members of the community. The consequences can be dreadful.

Stephen Lewis, Co-Director of Aids-Free World, comment on how women's voices have been silenced in the fight against the AIDS pandemic. Attending the 2011 International Conference on Aids and Sexually Transmitted Infections in Africa (ICASA) in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, he explained how infected women have been going through isolation, discrimination and stigmatisation within their own communities. This is what he had to say: "Gender inequality doomed their lives. Sexual violence fed and feeds the virus. The entire survival of communities and families was placed on their shoulders. Men were the social

¹⁰ C. Enloe & N. Puechguirbal, 'Failing to Secure the Peace: Practical Gendered Lessons from Haiti & Iraq', *The Boston Consortium on Gender, Security and Human Rights*, Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University, 26 October, 2004, p. 8.

determinants of women's health, and men simply didn't care."¹¹ In spite of their strength and courage, women are constantly pushed aside by male hegemony, with the complicity of the international community. To illustrate this point, he added:

Just a few days ago, coincident with World AIDS Day, the Harvard School of Public Health held a symposium called AIDS@30 to assess the past and plot the future. The symposium had a Global Advisory Council of nineteen eminent experts on the pandemic: 17 men and 2 women. It is ever thus. It's the rare woman indeed who doesn't ultimately report to a man in the world of HIV, or who can command, ever-so-rarely, the place and presence that legions of men command automatically.¹²

II. Women as Civilian Victims

Women, defined by the international community as civilian victims, need a (male) protector who will risk his life for them. The masculinisation of the protector leads to the feminisation of the protected.¹³ Indeed, the (male) protector versus the (female) protected is part of the rhetoric that is used by international organisations and governments to maintain women in the category of victims, thus preventing them from participating in key decision making process in the post-conflict phase. However, women are not vulnerable *per se* in times of war. They are made more vulnerable because of existing inequalities and discriminations in peaceful societies reinforced by gendered power hierarchies.¹⁴

Interestingly enough, the fact that women are depicted in subordinate positions to men reinforces the gap between powerless women and powerful men, thus feminising peace and masculinising war.¹⁵ Associating women with peace and men with war reinforces a gender hierarchy because it reduces the value of women's efforts in peace building and allows men to continue to dominate the agenda in international relations. Women's voices are deemed inauthentic in matters of peace and security issues. The depiction of women as being 'naturally' more peaceful than men because of their role in the

¹¹ S. Lewis, Co-Director of Aids-Free World, *2011 International Conference On Aids and Sexually Transmitted Infections in Africa (ICASA)*, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, at: <http://allafrica.com/stories/201112060911.html> (accessed on 6 December, 2011).

¹² Ibid.

¹³ C. Enloe, *Globalization & Militarization, Feminists Make the Link*, New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers 2007, p. 61.

¹⁴ N. Puechguirbal, 'Discourses on Gender, Patriarchy and Resolution 1325: a Textual Analysis of UN Documents, *International Peacekeeping, Special Issue, Women, Peace and Conflict: A Decade after Resolution 1325 2010-17*, p. 176.

¹⁵ N. Puechguirbal & M. Haeri, 'From helplessness to agency: examining the plurality of women's experiences in armed conflict', *International Review of the Red Cross* 2010-92, p. 109.

household as mediators and care takers has led to the essential association of women with peace on the international stage.¹⁶

Indeed, since the plurality of women's roles and responsibilities in war is not acknowledged, as combatants, community leaders, caretakers and providers, their agency is denied. Ann Tickner analyses the situation as follows: "The association of femininity with peace lends support to an idealised masculinity that depends on constructing women as passive victims in need of protection."¹⁷ As a result, women are disempowered in the reconstruction phase and maintained in the category of victims, together with the children, the elderly and the handicapped. According to the French anthropologist Françoise Héritier, the fact that we consider "sex as a sociological variable," similar to other categories based on race, age, colour, religion or ethnicity, means that we implicitly acknowledge the masculine norm as the universal reference.¹⁸

Language is key to understanding how women are disenfranchised and marginalised in peace processes and post-conflict rehabilitation. The current practice of sidelining women's efforts or overlooking their own needs can be traced back to the way women are depicted in United Nations reporting, for instance. In those reports, women are very often associated with children, thus mainly defined as nurturing mothers. Locked into the private sphere, women are prevented from crossing the boundaries to the public realm where men design policies and make decisions about the future of a post-conflict society.¹⁹ As Charli Carpenter highlights it: "Through their association with children, women, but not men, have been constructed as possessing the attributes associated with a claim to immunity: innocence and vulnerability."²⁰ Being considered mainly as vulnerable and innocent civilians, women are in need of protection. The consequence of this gender essentialism is twofold: first of all, it claims that all women are civilians, irrespective of the participation of women in wars as combatants and secondly, it assumes that if all women are civilians, all men are combatants. Charli Carpenter adds: "Missing from the discussion is a sense that women play a role in armed conflict other than that of passive victims and mothers, or that adult male civilians possess specific protection needs or vulnerabilities in war-affected regions."²¹ The constructed assumption that women are mainly mothers frames them as inherently more peaceful than men, thus marginalising them even further from decision-making

¹⁶ Tickner 2001, supra note 1, pp. 59-60.

¹⁷ A. Tickner, *Gender in International Relations, Feminist perspectives on Achieving Global Security*, New York: Columbia University Press 1992, p.59.

¹⁸ Quoted in: N. Puechguirbal, 'Peacekeeping, Peacebuilding and Post-Conflict reconstruction', *Gender Matters in Global Politics, A Feminist Introduction to International Relations*, Routledge: London & New York 2010, p. 162.

¹⁹ N. Puechguirbal, 'Women and Children: Deconstructing a Paradigm', *Seton Hall of Diplomacy and International Relations* 2004-1, p. 5.

²⁰ Carpenter 2006, supra note 45, p. 31.

²¹ Idem, p. 38.

levels. In addition, it hides the multiple roles women may play during armed conflicts, such as combatants, and the difficulties they will be facing during the reintegration phase.

To put it clearly, women are part of the vulnerable groups together with children; they are victims who are targeted by men in arms, which means that women are implicitly not combatants; and, as a powerless homogeneous group, they have special needs that require special protection by (male) protectors. Women are the 'special' others. Interestingly enough, women who participated in armed conflict are seen as being 'driven' to it and, in most UN reports, women are always 'associated' with fighting forces instead of being actively involved in combat.²²

Following the earthquake that struck Haiti on 12 January 2010, international organisations poured into the country with the aim of assisting the survivors who were living in conditions of extreme hardship. Very few of those organisations, however, integrated a gender perspective into their humanitarian work and they continued to apply the same worn-out recipes that eventually led to the marginalisation of women. In the humanitarian rhetoric, women were seen as a homogeneous group of powerless victims of the earthquake and the beneficiaries of assistance. In the months following the seism, the United Nations World Food Program (WFP) started to implement a 'women only' food distribution.²³ The rationale behind that decision was that women were more likely to use the food for their children or distribute it fairly within their family members. At the same time, the perimeters for the food distribution were secured by military peacekeepers with women being policed through the process. Deemed more violent and unreliable, the Haitian men were excluded from the distribution process. Very quickly, a tension rose between the women entitled to receiving food coupons and the men waiting outside the perimeters manned by peacekeepers. As Sandra Uwantege-Hart observed, this situation resulted in

a physical space fraught with the tension of gendered exclusion characterized by differing entitlements to food. [...] The environment surrounding distribution points thereby entailed a real risk for many women, who were in some cases robbed of their food, or, prior to distributions, were coerced to engage in sexual acts in order to receive food coupons entitling them to food rations during distribution.²⁴

²² Shepherd 2008, *supra* note 4, p. 88.

²³ S. Uwantege-Hart, *Grand Fanm Rete Anlè, Ti Fanm Rete Anba: Discourse and Disconnect between the International Humanitarian Community and the Haitian Women's Movement in Post-Earthquake Port-au-Prince, Haiti*, Dissertation Submitted in fulfillment of the requirement for the Master in Development Studies (MDev), Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva, 2011.

²⁴ *Idem*, p. 34.

It is interesting to see here how the shift in gender power relations following the earthquake was completely ignored by international organisations. The destruction of infrastructures affected the conduct of business and severely hit the formal sector. Although the situation has not been documented yet, one of the consequences might have been an increasing role of women as breadwinners. Furthermore, a majority of Haitian women continued to work in the informal sector, as street and market vendors for example, and may have recovered more rapidly than the men who were involved in the formal economy affected by the seism. As a result, the Haitian men may have gone through a power crisis as they lost access to and control over resources.²⁵ This is only a hypothesis that would need further investigation, since Haitian women already represented 60% of the single heads of household before the seism and were therefore the major decision-makers within the household as well as the main economic pillar. At the same time, a local Haitian masculinity was at play against an international hegemonic masculinity which led, eventually, to the alienation of Haitian men by the male humanitarian workers and peacekeepers in control of the distribution points. This situation had obvious consequences for women who were at risk of being assaulted once they had left the secured perimeters.

What is interesting in this story is the fact that international organisations never learn any lessons from past shortcomings and they replicate them in the next crisis. In 2004, the city of Gonaïves in Haiti was severely hit by a hurricane that caused flooding and mudslides and left around 2,500 people dead.²⁶ Following the hurricane, a large-humanitarian operation was put in place but “at the very beginning when the first trucks with food were trying to reach the distribution points they were just completely looted by strong young men.”²⁷ As a result, the humanitarian community decided to switch strategy and to designate the women as the main recipients of the food. The aim was not to empower women but, because women were seen as more passive and less violent than the men, to ensure that the distribution could take place without incident. The distribution perimeters were secured by peacekeepers and Haitian men were kept at bay. Incidents of violence against women were reported once they had left the security perimeter, but since the situation was never really documented, lessons were not compiled and the same mistakes were replicated several years later.

III. Security Issues

Security is gendered. Interestingly enough, security often refers to militarised security. However, women also experience forms of insecurity when the guns are silent and their own home and neighbourhood can become as insecure as a

²⁵ *Idem*, p. 37.

²⁶ Sex and age disaggregated data not available.

²⁷ Enloe & Puechguirbal 2004, *supra* note 10, p. 2.

battlefield.²⁸ The problem is that a gender-blind approach does not allow us to see how women and men cope with violence in times of armed conflict and when war is over. And yet, they do not experience identical threats to their security.

There is a strong assumption that the way women experience insecurity is no different from the way men do.²⁹ Since the masculine norm of reference is used to illustrate narratives of war and post-war situations, women's experiences are not taken into account. Very often, one uses generic words such as 'populations', 'people', 'communities', 'groups', etc. to report on the ways women and men live through conflict and participate in the post-conflict reconstruction, irrespective of their different and specific approaches. Since there is no collection of sex and gender disaggregated data, it is impossible to pin down the differences between women and men and highlight discriminations and gaps in the reconstruction process.

As Cynthia Enloe underlines this issue: "[...] So gender-disaggregation has consequences. It makes inequities visible. Once you make inequities visible you are also likely to make visible the power dynamics that create those inequities."³⁰ And once gendered power relations are uncovered, they clearly show how women are marginalised, ostracised and lack access to and control over resources. To fill the gaps between women and men, one then needs to take action and offer solutions, which means that this will have political and financial consequences, especially for international organisations working in the post-conflict setting. As a result, it is more convenient for decision-makers to ignore the situation and not ask too many questions about how to find solutions to fill the gaps. Cynthia Enloe adds that "there's a lot of incentive to be uncurious. Incuriosity is a political act."³¹

However, if one were to pay closer attention to women's experiences and practices of war, one would better understand issues of peace and security in an all-inclusive approach. In 2008, the humanitarian organisation OXFAM and its research partner in Iraq, the Al-Amal Association, asked Iraqi women how they would assess their own security. The report states that, "as compared with 2007 & 2006, more than 40% of respondents said their security situation worsened last year."³² Whereas for most of the male American soldiers and Iraqi officials, the ongoing war in Iraq was labelled a success that would soon

²⁸ C. Enloe, 'Demilitarization – or more of the same? Feminist questions to ask in the post-war moment', *The Postwar Moment, Militaries, Masculinities and International Peacekeeping*, London: Lawrence & Wishart 2002, pp. 26-27.

²⁹ Enloe & Puechguirbal 2004, supra note 10, p. 7.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² OXFAM International, *In Her Own Words: Iraqi women talk about their greatest concerns and challenges, a Survey*, p.3, at: <http://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/oxfam-in-her-own-words-iraqi-women-survey-08mar2009.pdf>.

improve their sense of security, for the women it had a different meaning. The OXFAM report highlights how insecurity threatens the daily lives of women and the persons they take care of: for example, lack of access to healthcare; children being unable to reach their school; family members kidnapped or injured; widows not receiving a pension from the government, etc.

As Cynthia Enloe explains, the sense of insecurity felt by the Iraqi women is multifaceted: "An Iraqi woman who could not identify the body of her missing husband would not have access to the family's bank account (which usually was in her husband's name), would not be eligible for government aid to widows, and would not be able to remarry. Wartime life is gendered. So is wartime death."³³ If for most men security entails the cessation of hostility, it is obvious that for women it has a more far-reaching meaning. Ann Tickner highlights the fact that "genuine security requires not only the absence of war but also the elimination of unjust social relations, including unequal gender relations."³⁴ In general, governments are preoccupied with national security, and may resort to violence to establish and maintain state order, soon turning to a remilitarisation of society in the post-war environment. Post-conflict violence translates into threats for women's physical and psychological security. Women's physical integrity is threatened through international trafficking; domestic violence increases; women's access to resources is jeopardised, forcing some of them to turn to prostitution to make a living. Hierarchical gender relations prevent us from achieving a sustainable peace that would be all-inclusive and would not lead to a resurgence of armed conflict.

When women are consulted, they can clearly indicate what security threats they fear most and participate in their own protection, at home, in the street or in a refugee camp. Because security issues lie in the everyday routine of women and girls, the dots between security and well-being are not easily connected. In 2000, the organisation Refugees International reported that the United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR) had run out of money to purchase soap for approximately half a million refugees in Tanzania. Not only did the girls – who relied on the soap for personal hygiene – drop out of school, but there were reports of increased incidence of girls having sex in exchange for soap.³⁵ Who would have thought that a commonplace item like soap would have such a dire impact on the living conditions of the girls? We are not talking about a militarised threat to women and girls' security here; we are paying attention to invisible details in their lives that are considered of prime importance for their own protection.

³³ C. Enloe, *Nimo's War, Emma's War, Making Feminist Sense of the Iraq War*, Berkeley: University of California Press 2010, p. 222.

³⁴ Tickner 1992, *supra* note 15, p. 128.

³⁵ Refugees International, 'The Impact of Soap Shortages on Female Refugees in Tanzania', *Notes from the Field*, at: http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/reliefweb_pdf/node-83891.pdf (accessed on 1 August 2011)

The need to consult with women about protection issues in the post-conflict phase so that they can choose the most suitable options for their safety cannot be stressed enough. In other refugee camps in Tanzania, humanitarian organisations decided to set up specially marked tents in an area designated 'safe' because large amounts of households were headed by single women. During the period of time that the system was used, the number of sexual attacks clearly increased. Why? Because the bright orange tents acted like markers pointing to unaccompanied women, i.e. without a husband to protect them, sending a strong signal to other men that they were 'available'.³⁶ Had women been consulted, instead of having humanitarian workers decide for them, they for sure would have avoided being completely ostracised by their own community and would have chosen a different protection approach. As previously seen, women are mainly defined as recipients of assistance and passive beneficiaries, as they cannot assert their rights and they are not treated as actors who are empowered to make informed decisions.

IV. Deconstructing Patriarchy

Since we are investigating power relations here, we should mention patriarchy-promoting political models that are constructed without a gender perspective. International relations are still shaped by patriarchal norms and behaviours that prevent women from playing an active part in the different stages of a post-conflict reconstruction process. Deconstructing patriarchy requires both making inequalities visible and leading a feminist investigation to uncovering the subtle way patriarchal relationships use to operate. As Cynthia Enloe explains it,³⁷ a society or a group can be defined as patriarchal if it is dependent on three main dynamics: a) masculinity as a privilege; b) the marginalisation of women; and c) it practises that legitimacy, that privilege and that marginalisation (cultural and traditional practices for instance).

The art of procrastination is a strategy that patriarchal organisations use to delay taking care of gender-related issues that can affect ongoing programmes and activities in the field. As Angela Ravens-Robert points out, "in an emergency context, there is 'no time' to do gender work, as what is needed is rapid action, life-saving food, and material distribution. Performing nuanced analysis and targeting change is too cumbersome, complex, and time consuming, indeed downright harmful to the 'real work' of saving lives."³⁸ A lack of understanding of the differential impact of war on women and men as well as of the shift in gender roles leads to generic conclusions about their needs and, as stated above, reinforces existing inequalities and the

³⁶ Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, *The Gender Dimensions of Internal Displacement: Concept Paper and Annotated Bibliography*, 1998, p.23.

³⁷ Enloe 2007, supra note 11, p. 68.

³⁸ A. Raven-Roberts, 'Gender Mainstreaming in Peacekeeping Operations: Talking the Talk, Tripping over the Walk', *Gender, Conflict and Peacekeeping*, New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005, p. 57.

marginalisation of the most vulnerable individuals. Gender concerns are pushed aside; they will be taken care of 'later', at a 'later' stage, after more pressing political matters will be completed. However, as Cynthia Enloe encapsulates it: "Later is a patriarchal time zone."³⁹

In the same vein, members of patriarchal organisations always manage to convince their interlocutors that the time is not yet ripe for tackling gender-related issues. Talking about the issue of sexual violence against women, the Director of Operations at the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) stresses that "the progress made over these last years is impressive, and this issue becomes more and more part of each of our activities. [However] *we still have a long way to go*."⁴⁰ Every single year, the ICRC uses this rhetoric when it reaffirms to donors its willingness to support the integration of a gender perspective into its work. According to its senior managers, the organisation is making progress *but* it takes time to change the mentalities, thus justifying why it cannot allocate more resources to the file now. 'We still have a long way to go' is the catchphrase used by patriarchy to gain time, justify its opposition to change and lull feminist analysers into believing that real progresses are made. This way of thinking is also translated by the UN in several discourses relating to progress in the promotion of women's rights: "*There is a long way to go* before the rights of Afghan women are fully protected, says a United Nations report released today,"⁴¹ or elsewhere: "*There is still a long way to go* in ensuring women's voices are heard in decision making,"⁴² or in another statement: "While we've risen above glass ceilings, *there is still a long way to go*,"⁴³ etc.

These sentences have become part of the political landscape of patriarchal organisations and women and men repeat it without measuring its impact on the perpetuation of stereotypes and bias that slow down the process towards gender equality. The focus should not be on the long way to go but instead on tackling the structural obstacles and hurdles that prevent women from moving ahead in the assertion of their rights.

³⁹ C. Enloe, *The Curious Feminist, Searching for women in a new age of empire*, Berkeley: University of California Press 2004, p. 215.

⁴⁰ I. Jacquemet, 'Out of the shadows', *The Magazine of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement* 2011-1, p. 9. (Emphasis ours.)

⁴¹ UN News Centre, *Afghanistan has 'long way to go' in protecting women from violence – UN report*, 23 November 2011 at:

<http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=40491&Cr=violence&Cr1=women>.

⁴² UN HABITAT, 'Gender Equality for a better future', *An overview of UN-HABITAT'S Gender Equality Action Plan (2008-2013)*, Nairobi, p. 3.

⁴³ United Nations Development Program (UNDP), 'When women succeed, we all win', *Newsroom*, International Women's Day, at:

<http://content.undp.org/go/newsroom/2011/march/international-womens-day/international-womens-day-.en> (accessed on 8 March 2011).

In a related development, humanitarian workers have been heard complaining that “we’re here to save lives, not ask whether or not someone is a woman or a man before we provide assistance or to give priority to women over men.”⁴⁴ By identifying the vulnerabilities of women and men, as well as their capacities, at the beginning of a humanitarian operation, one understands how they are coping with a natural disaster/war/crisis. It is not about giving priorities to women over men, it is being able to identify who is the most vulnerable and why and address specific needs linked to those vulnerabilities. The fact that many humanitarian workers confuse ‘gender’ with ‘women’ does not help. A gender mainstreaming approach does not replace the provision of programs targeting women, given existing inequalities, and at the same time it needs to be ensured that they are consulted and that their voices are heard in the process. The problem often comes from the fact that humanitarian staff work with assumptions that women and men are affected by crises in the same way, that they both are victims, and that, as a result, delivery of assistance should not make any difference between them. They forget to read a crisis or a war with gender lenses that would help them to highlight social inequalities already prevailing before the event and that would need to be addressed.

Associated with patriarchy is the concept of masculinisation that Cynthia Enloe describes as “a step-by-step process by which any group or any institution both becomes more dominated by men – as its ordinary members and as its leaders – and becomes more thoroughly imbued with a masculinised culture – its established rituals, its accepted criteria for wielding influence, the skills deemed valuable for rising within its ranks, *the shared jokes among its members*.”⁴⁵ The French sociologist Françoise Gaspard explains why men are reluctant to let women enter the public arena: using the example of women in politics, she says that not only do men want to retain privileges they take for granted, but at the same time, they want to keep women outside a very sexist playground that is their ‘natural’ preserve. As the men themselves express it bluntly, if more women get access to political responsibilities, “we will not be able to share jokes anymore.”⁴⁶ What are these jokes that men tell each other and are not able to share when women are present? Sexist jokes, of course, that target women as objects.

A hegemonic masculinity is defined as a dominant masculinity that is embodied in a patriarchal authority and sustains a strict patriarchal order based on unequal relationships and binary opposition between women and men.⁴⁷ A hegemonic masculinity is constructed in opposition to subordinate masculinities and femininities. As Jennifer Heeg Maruska explains: “if gender is not widely considered to be useful as a line of inquiry into politics, it is only

⁴⁴ Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), *Gender Equality and Humanitarian Assistance: A guide to the issues*, Quebec, 2003, p. 11.

⁴⁵ Enloe 2010, supra note 31, p. 115. (Emphasis ours.)

⁴⁶ F. Gaspard, ‘L’antiféminisme en politique’, *Un siècle d’antiféminisme*, Paris : Fayard 1999, p. 349.

⁴⁷ Tickner 1992, supra note 15, pp.6-7.

because politics are dominated so completely by the mindset of hegemonic masculinity."⁴⁸ So-called masculine values have become the unquestionable norms and prominent set of beliefs in international relations, thus disguising their superiority under a 'gender-neutral' approach. R. Connell comments: "The most powerful groups of men usually have few personal incentives for gender change. Other groups may have stronger motives for change."⁴⁹ A dominant masculinity, at the centre of a gendered hierarchy either political, military, cultural or economic, will use all necessary means, including violence, to assert its prominence and remain in power.

In particular, a conservative backlash happens after wars when patriarchal ideology wants to reassert its power through the return to the so-called *status quo ante bellum*. There is a tendency for men to use peace negotiations as leverage for reintroducing a pre-war order that is synonymous with peace and security. This definition of peace and security, however, doesn't match women's needs and requirements. Christine Chinkin explains: "Concepts of reconstruction and rehabilitation may be misnomers in the case of women. Both concepts assume an element of going back, restoring to a position or capacity that previously existed. But this is not necessarily what women seek."⁵⁰ War can be a very powerful transformative process for women who assume non-traditional roles and take up more responsibilities. They not only experience losses but also gains; war offers a window of opportunity for women to weaken patriarchy and create a peace where women's rights are promoted, discriminatory laws changed, and gender power relations transformed. However, time and time again, women fail to consolidate and sustain their gains during the transition from war to peace: "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."⁵¹ Indeed, remaining in power in the post-conflict phase because they are the so-called legitimate brokers for peace, men do not see a need for gender transformation. Laura Sjoberg and Caron Gentry write: "The interest of women's advancement will only be served when it converges with the interest of men in power, and will stop when it threatens male dominance."⁵² As a result, we witness a backlash for women in the post-conflict environment, when men reclaim their masculinity and when patriarchy

⁴⁸ J. Heeg Maruska, 'When are states hypermasculine?', *Gender and International Security, Feminist Perspectives*, London & New York: Routledge 2010, p. 249.

⁴⁹ R.W. Connell, 'Masculinities, the reduction of violence and the pursuit of peace', *The PostWar Moment, Militaries, Masculinities and International Peacekeeping*, London: Lawrence & Wishart 2002, p. 36.

⁵⁰ C. Chinkin, 'Gender, International Legal Framework and Peace-Building', *Gender and Peace Building in Africa*, Edited by Kari Karamé, Oslo, Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, 2004, p. 32.

⁵¹ S. Meintjes, A. Pillay and M. Turshen, 'There Is No Aftermath for Women', *The Aftermath, Women in Post-Conflict Transformation*, London & New York: Zed Books 2002, p.8.

⁵² Sjoberg & Gentry 2007, supra note 6, p. 51.

deepens thanks to a return to pre-war norms, traditions and power. Women's gains are too fragile to give them leverage to build on the responsibilities they acquired during the conflict and consolidate social transformation in the reconstruction phase.

Conclusion

Because the participation of women in the public realm of politics poses a threat to male dominance and power, women have been repeatedly marginalised on the grounds of essentialist gender differences that use biology as a symbol for discrimination. While claiming so-called gender neutrality, men continue to impose their rules that are only questioned by feminists in search of hidden power hierarchies that keep women in a subordinate status.

Redefining power relations means challenging the static definition and dualism of masculinity and femininity as well as their respective attributes. War-torn societies are reconstructed on the premise of a return to the so-called values and references that prevailed before the hostilities, irrespective of the differential impact of war on women and men and the shift in gender roles. Women get involved in local mobilisation for peace, at the grassroots level, and try to sustain the gains they made during the conflict in stepping out of traditional roles. However, because they also have to take care of domestic chores, they often give up their participation in the public sphere because of a heavy workload. On the one hand, they have to ensure their own security in the absence of protection at home and in the street, in spite of a cease-fire that focuses on disarming male rebels, members of gangs or military groups; on the other hand, they have to find strategies to keep families and communities together and assert their newly defined rights. The problem is that women do not always recognise the changes in themselves and how they can convert them into power to face the re-masculinisation of society in the wake of war: "The reasons why women regress in the aftermath are various. It seems that many do not consciously internalise or conceptualise the changes in their roles; without a conscious translation, there can be no concerted effort to defend women's opportunities and gains in peacetime."⁵³

Integrating a gender perspective into peace and security issues allows us to push the boundaries that limit women's actions and the enjoyment of their rights: "There are limits on the things that society views women as capable of, against unlimited masculinities."⁵⁴ The goal is to promote unlimited femininities to counterbalance the prominent male exercise of power in international relations that has its foundation in an archaic sexual division of labour.

Is there still a long way to go?

⁵³ Meintjes, Pillay & Turshen 2002, supra note 48, p.9.

⁵⁴ Sjoberg & Gentry 2007, supra note 6, p. 239.

- The Amsterdam Law Forum is an initiative supported by the VU University Library -