Breaking the Gendered Continuum of Violence

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*Contribution to the programme of November 15, 2016
on the Women's Pentagon Action, on-line at
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_EuCvZ8nxJE*

*In London, women of the international movement Women in Black against
War, hold a vigil to mark October 2, United Nations International
Day of Non-Violence*

What's gender got to do with violence? A lot! And that's the case whatever kind of violence we're thinking of. The most important new knowledge the feminist movement has given us is that gender (the way women and men see themselves and each other, the way we typically behave) isn't given at birth, it's socially shaped. Unless it's interrupted - by thoughtful parents and teachers - upbringing and experience tends to shape boys and men as violent

- as users of force, as predatory, as disrespectful of the female and despizing of the feminine, as careless of the wellbeing of others. The facts speak for themselves. In Britain statistics show men are the ones that commit 95% of violent crime and 99% of violent sexual crime.

The every-day/every-nightness of sexual violence by men against women and other vulnerable groups in our peacetime societies makes it inevitable that in times of armed conflict the abuse will multiply and take new forms. In reverse, training for soldiering in state armed forces and rebel militias removes any inhibition males may have against using violence to impose their will. And after the fighting ends and men return to civilian life, often they've been so brutalized and traumatized in the military that they're even more likely than before to enact violence in their homes and streets.

Then ask this: are people who 'normalize' violence against other people in war and peace likely to show concern and respect for the wellbeing of other creatures and our shared habitats? Hardly!

All this leads me to think there's a 'continuum' of violence, and gender runs through it. In which case, to diminish violence means we have to break the causal links between its different instances, kinds and locations. It means our activism has to strive for (at least) three goals all at the same time: the demilitarization and 'civilization' of society; the safety and equality of women; and the wellbeing of the natural world. These are inseparable aspects of peace.

And this is the point: achieving them is predicated on revolutionizing the way we live gender. Bog-standard masculinity could be (can we not imagine it?) a non-violent nurturing masculinity. Acceptable femininity could cease to be complementary to masculinity, wrapping around it like *yin* and *yang.* It could be equally non-violent and nurturing, but to that we might add confident and assertive, non-compliant, non-victimized. And who's in the best position to bring about change the gender relationship? Might we not think: the dominant party?

The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, Women in Black against Militarism and War, Women for Life on Earth - in our organizations women are grasping the continuum of violence and using feminist analysis and activism to break the links. And today we and loads of other women's groups are celebrating the Women's Pentagon Action of 1980, from which so much anti-violence activism has flowed.

But: do the men get it? I'm looking for banners that read "Men's League for Non-violence, Peace and Freedom"? Will we see placards in the crowd stating "Men against War"? And proclaiming "Men for Reshaping Masculinity", "Men for Life on Earth"? Until men grasp how they themselves are harmed - deformed - by the masculinity that's expected of them, until they take collective and impassioned action to change the processes that shape them and the way they see themselves and live their lives - there'll be no peace on earth. And no peace for earth.

Some published references on this theme:

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Cockburn, Cynthia and Ann Oakley (2011) 'The culture of masculinity costs all too much to ignore', article in *The Guardian*, 25 November.

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