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Feminist Movement to End Violence

Contemporary feminist movement successfully called attention to the need to end male violence against women. Shelters for abused and battered women were founded all around the United States by women activists dedicated to helping victimized women heal themselves and begin new lives. Despite years of committed hard work, the problem of male violence against women steadily increases. It is often assumed by feminist activists that this violence is distinct from other forms of violence in this society because it is specifically linked to the politics of sexism and male supremacy: the right of men to dominate women. In Susan Schechter's thorough study of the battered women's movement, *Women and Male Violence*, she continually emphasizes "that violence against women is rooted in male domination." Her chapter "Towards an Analysis of Violence Against Women in the Family" examines the extent to which the ideology of male supremacy both encourages and supports violence against women:

Theoretical explanations for battering are not mere exercises; by pinpointing the conditions that create violence against women, they suggest the directions in which a movement should proceed to stop it. Woman abuse is viewed here as an historical expression of male domination manifested within the family and currently reinforced by the institutions, economic arrangements, and sexist division of labor within capitalist society. Only by analyzing this total context of battering will women and men be able to devise a long-range plan to eliminate it.

While I agree with Schechter that male violence against women in the family is an expression of male domination, I believe that violence is inextricably linked to all acts of violence in this society that occur between the powerful and the powerless, the dominant and the dominated. While male supremacy encourages the use of abusive force to maintain male domination of women, it is the Western philosophical notion of hierarchical rule and coercive authority that is the root cause of violence against women, of adult violence against children, of all violence between those who dominate and those who are dominated. It is this belief system that is the foundation on which sexist ideology and other ideologies of group oppression are based; they can be eliminated only when this foundation is eliminated.

It is essential for continued feminist struggle to end violence against women that this struggle be viewed as a component of an overall movement to end violence. So far feminist movement has primarily focused on male violence, and as a consequence lends credibility to sexist stereotypes that suggest men are violent, women are not; men are abusers, women are victims. This type of thinking allows us to ignore the extent to which women (with men) in this society accept and perpetuate the idea that it is acceptable for a dominant party or group to maintain power over the dominated by using coercive force. It allows us to overlook or ignore the extent to which women exert coercive authority over others or act violently. The fact that women may not commit violent acts as often as men does not negate the reality of female violence. We must see both men and women in this society as groups who support the use of violence if we are to eliminate it.

The social hierarchy in white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy is one in which theoretically men are the powerful, women the powerless; adults the powerful, children the powerless; white

people the powerful, black people and other non-white peoples the powerless. In a given situation, whichever party is in power is likely to use coercive authority to maintain that power if it is challenged or threatened. Although most women clearly do not use abuse and battery to control and dominate men (even though a small minority of women batter men), they may employ abusive measures to maintain authority in interactions with groups over whom they exercise power. Many of us who were raised in patriarchal homes where male parents maintained domination and control by abusing women and children know that the problem was often exacerbated by the fact that women also believed that a person in authority has the right to use force to maintain authority. Some of the women in these families exerted coercive authority over their children (as do women in families where men are not violent), sometimes with random acts of violent aggression for no clear reason or through systematic verbal abuse. This violence is not unlike male violence against children and women, even though it may not be as prevalent (which seems unlikely since 90 percent of all parents use some form of physical force against children). While it in no way diminishes the severity of the problem of male violence against women to emphasize that women are likely to use coercive authority when they are in power positions, recognizing this reminds us that women, like men, must work to unlearn socialization that teaches us it is acceptable to maintain power by coercion or force. By concentrating solely on ending male violence against women, feminist activists may overlook the severity of the problem. They may encourage women to resist male coercive domination without encouraging them to oppose all forms of coercive domination.

In a section of her theoretical chapter analyzing violence against women in the family, “Questions in Theory Building,” Schechter acknowledges a need for further investigation of factors that cause battery. She points to the fact that women in lesbian relationships are sometimes battered to raise the question of how this information “fits” with a theory of battery that sees male domination as the cause. She answers, “One could theorize that models of intimate relationships based on power and domination are so pervasive in this society that they do, in fact, affect the nature of relationships between people of the same sex.” Yet she is reluctant to accept this theory as it does not affirm male domination as the cause of battery. So she suggests that there must be greater research before the two forms of battery could be linked. However, if one assumes, as I do, that battery is caused by the belief permeating this culture that hierarchical rule and coercive authority are natural, then all our relationships tend to be based on power and domination, and thus all forms of battery are linked. In *The Cultural Basis of Racism and Group Oppression*, philosopher John Hodge suggests that it is in the context of the traditional Western family, with its authoritarian male rule and its authoritarian adult rule, that most of us are socialized to accept group oppression and the use of force to uphold authority. These patterns form the basis of all our relationships:

Most personal relationships in Dualist culture take place within the established institutions. Consequently, most personal relationships contain a strong hierarchical element. Most personal interaction occurs within hierarchical structures and is shaped by these structures. We have just considered the relationship usually prevalent in the family where adult rule over non-adults and male rule over females is the accepted norm. In addition to these personal relationships, other personal interactions usually occur with the hierarchical framework of employer to employee, of boss or foreman to workers or crew, of producer or owner to user, of landlord to tenant, of lender to borrower, of teacher to student, of governor to governed—in short, of controller to controlled.

In all these relationships, the power the dominant party exercises is maintained by the threat (acted upon or not) that abusive punishment, physical or psychological, could be used if the hierarchical structure is threatened.

Male violence against women in personal relationships is one of the most blatant expressions of the use of abusive force to maintain domination and control. It epitomizes the actualization of the concept of hierarchical rule and coercive authority. Unlike violence against children, or white racial violence against other ethnic groups, it is the violence that is most overtly condoned and accepted, even celebrated in this culture. Society's acceptance and perpetuation of that violence helps maintain it and makes it difficult to control or eliminate. That acceptance can be explained only in part by patriarchal rule supporting male domination of women through the use of force. Patriarchal male rule took on an entirely different character in the context of advanced capitalist society. In the precapitalist world, patriarchy allowed all men to completely rule women in their families, to decide their fate, to shape their destiny. Men could freely batter women with no fear of punishment. They could decide whom their daughters were to marry, whether they would read or write, etc. Many of these powers were lost to men with the development of the capitalist nation-state in the United States. This loss of power did not correspond with decreased emphasis on the ideology of male supremacy. However, the idea of the patriarch as worker, providing for and protecting his family, was transformed as his labor primarily benefited the capitalist state.

Men not only no longer had complete authority and control over women; they no longer had control over their own lives. They were controlled by the economic needs of capitalism. As workers, most men in our culture (like working women) are controlled, dominated. Unlike working women, working men are fed daily a fantasy diet of male supremacy and power. In actuality, they have very little power, and they know it. Yet they do not rebel against the economic order or make revolution. They are socialized by ruling powers to accept their dehumanization and exploitation in the public world of work, and they are taught to expect that the private world, the world of home and intimate relationships, will restore to them their sense of power, which they equate with masculinity. They are taught that they will be able to rule in the home, to control and dominate, that this is the big payoff for their acceptance of an exploitative economic social order. By condoning and perpetuating male domination of women to prevent rebellion on the job, ruling male capitalists ensure that male violence will be expressed in the home and not in the work force.

The entry of women into the work force, which also serves the interests of capitalism, has taken even more control over women away from men. Therefore men rely more on the use of violence to establish and maintain a sex-role hierarchy in which they are in a dominant position. At one time, their dominance was determined by the fact that they were the sole wage earners. Their need to dominate women (socially constructed by the ideology of male supremacy), coupled with suppressed aggression towards employers who "rule" over them, makes the domestic environment the center of explosive tensions that lead to violence. Women are the targets because there is no fear that men will suffer or be severely punished if they hurt women, especially wives and lovers. They would be punished if they violently attacked employers, police officers.

Black women and men have always called attention to a "cycle of violence" that begins with psychological abuse in the public world wherein the male worker may be subjected to control by a boss or authority figure that is humiliating and degrading. Since he depends on the work situation for material survival, he does not strike out or oppose the employer who would punish him by taking his job or imprisoning him. He suppresses this violence and releases it in what I call a "control" situation, a situation where he has no need to fear retaliation, wherein he does not

have to suffer as a consequence of acting violently. The home is usually this control situation, and the target for his abuse is usually female. Though his own expression of violence against women stems in part from the emotional pain he feels, the pain is released and projected onto the female. When the pain disappears he feels relief, even pleasure. His pain is gone even though it was not confronted or resolved in a healthy way. As the psychology of masculinity in sexist societies teaches men that to acknowledge and express pain negates masculinity and is a symbolic castration, causing pain rather than expressing it restores men's sense of completeness, of wholeness, of masculinity. The fate of many young black men in this society, whose lives are characterized by cycles of violence that usually climax in the death of others or their own deaths, epitomizes the peril of trying to actualize the fantasy of masculinity that is socially constructed by ruling groups in capitalist patriarchy.

Unlike many feminist activists writing about male violence against women, black women and men emphasize a "cycle of violence" that begins in the workplace because we are aware that systematic abuse is not confined to the domestic sphere, even though violent abuse is more commonly acted out in the home. To break out of this cycle of violence, to liberate themselves, black men and all men must begin to criticize the sexist notion of masculinity, to examine the impact of capitalism on their lives—the extent to which they feel degraded, alienated, and exploited in the work force. Men must begin to challenge notions of masculinity that equate manhood with ability to exert power over others, especially through the use of coercive force. Much of this work has to be done by men who are not violent, who have rejected the values of capitalist patriarchy. Most men who are violent against women are not seeking help or change. They do not feel that their acceptance and perpetration of violence against women is wrong. How can it be wrong if society rewards them for it? Television screens are literally flooded daily with tales of male violence, especially male violence against women. It is glamorized, made entertaining and sexually titillating. The more violent a male character is, whether he be hero or villain, the more attention he receives. Often a male hero has to exert harsher violence to subdue a villain. This violence is affirmed and rewarded. The more violent the male hero is (usually in his quest to save or protect a woman/victim), the more he receives love and affirmation from women. His acts of violence in the interest of protection are seen as a gesture of care, of his "love" for women and his concern for humanity.

This equation of violence with love on the part of women and men is another reason it is difficult to motivate most people to work to end violence. In real life, the equation of love with violence is part of early childhood socialization. An article in the October 1982 issue of *Mademoiselle* magazine, "A Special Report on Love, Violence, and the Single Woman," by Jane Patrick, calls attention to the fact that many women who are neither economically dependent on men nor bound to them through legal contracts do not reject males who are violent because they equate it with love. Patrick quotes Rodney Cate, professor of family studies, who links violence between parents and children to adult acceptance of violence in intimate relationships:

When you examine the context in which parents suffer their children, it is easier to understand how the victim—and the abuser—equate the violence with love. It's not hard to see how over time we begin to pair some sort of physical punishment with love and to believe that someone is hurting us because they love us.

Many parents teach children that violence is the easiest way (if not the most acceptable way) to end a conflict and assert power. By saying things like "I'm only doing this because I love you" while they are using physical abuse to control children, parents are not only equating violence with love, they are also offering a notion of love synonymous with passive acceptance, the

absence of explanation and discussions. In many homes small children and teenagers find their desire to discuss issues with parents sometimes viewed as a challenge to parental authority or power, as an act of “unlove.” Force is used by the parent to meet this perceived challenge or threat. Again, it needs to be emphasized that the idea that it is correct to use abuse to maintain authority is taught to individuals by church, school, and other institutions.

Love and violence have become so intertwined in this society that many people, especially women, fear that eliminating violence will lead to the loss of love. Popular paperback romances, like the Harlequin series, which ten years ago had no descriptions of male violence against women, now describe acts of hitting, rape, etc., all in the context of romantic love. It is interesting to note that most women in these romances now have professional careers and are often sexually experienced. Male violence, the romances suggest, has to be used to subdue these “uppity” women who, though equal to men in the workplace, must be forced to assume a subordinate position in the home. There is little suggestion that women should stop working. Their work is depicted as a gesture of defiance that adds passion to the sexual conflict at home, heightening sexual pleasure when the male uses force to transform the “uppity” woman into a passive, submissive being. Of course, the man is always white, rich, and a member of the ruling class.

These romances are read by millions of women who spend millions of hard-earned dollars to read material that reinforces sexist role patterns and romanticizes violence against women. It should be noted that they also uphold white supremacy and Western imperialism. Women reading romances are being encouraged to accept the idea that violence heightens and intensifies sexual pleasure. They are also encouraged to believe that violence is a sign of masculinity and a gesture of male care, that the degree to which a man becomes violently angry corresponds to the intensity of his affection and care. Therefore, women readers learn that passive acceptance of violence is essential if they are to receive the rewards of love and care. This is often the case in women’s lives. They may accept violence in intimate relationships, whether heterosexual or lesbian, because they do not wish to give up that care. They see enduring abuse as the price they pay. They know they can live without abuse; they do not think they can live without care.

Speaking of why poor women may not leave violent relationships, Schechter says, “Poor people experience so many different kinds of oppression, violence may be responded to as one of many abuses.” Certainly many black women feel they must confront a degree of abuse wherever they turn in this society. Black women as well as many other marginalized groups in graduate schools are often psychologically abused by professors who systematically degrade and humiliate them for a period of years, as long as it takes for the woman to finish her degree or to be so “messed up” that she drops out. Black women in professional positions who appear to have “made it” are often the targets of abuse by employers and co-workers who resent their presence. Black women who work in service jobs are daily bombarded with belittling, degrading comments and gestures on the part of the people who have power over them. The vast majority of poor black women in this society find they are continually subjected to abuse in public agencies, stores, etc. These women often feel that abuse will be an element in most of their personal interactions. They are more inclined to accept abuse in situations where there are some rewards or benefits, where abuse is not the sole characteristic of the interaction. Since this is usually the case in situations where male violence occurs, they may be reluctant, even unwilling, to end these relationships. Like other groups of women, they fear the loss of care.

Until women and men cease equating violence with love, understand that disagreements and conflicts in the context of intimate relationships can be resolved without violence, and reject the idea that men should dominate women, male violence against women will continue, and so will other forms of violent aggression in intimate relationships. To help bring an end to violence

against, women, feminist activists have taken the lead in criticizing the ideology of male supremacy and showing the ways in which it supports and condones that violence. Yet efforts to end male violence against women will succeed only if they are part of an overall struggle to end violence.

Currently feminist activists supporting nuclear disarmament link militarism and patriarchy, showing connections between the two. Like analysis of violence against women, the tendency in these discussions is to focus on male support of violence—a focus that limits our understanding of the problem. Many women who advocate feminism see militarism as exemplifying patriarchal concepts of masculinity and the right of males to dominate others. To these women, to struggle against militarism is to struggle against patriarchy and male violence against women. Introducing a recently published book of essays, *Ain't Nowhere We Can Run: A Handbook for Women on the Nuclear Mentality*, Susan Koen writes:

It is our belief that the tyranny created by nuclear activities is merely the latest and most serious manifestation of a culture characterized in every sphere by domination and exploitation. For this reason, the presence of the nuclear mentality in the world can only be viewed as one part of the whole, not an isolated issue. We urge the realization that separating the issue of nuclear power plants and weapons from the dominant cultural, social, and political perspectives of our society results in a limited understanding of the problem, and in turn limits the range of possible solutions. We offer then the argument that those male-defined constructs which control our social structures and relationships are directly responsible for the proliferation of nuclear plants and weapons. Patriarchy is the root of the problem, and the imminent dangers created by the nuclear mentality serve to call our attention to the basic problem of patriarchy.

By equating militarism and patriarchy, women who advocate feminism often structure their arguments in such a way as to suggest that to be male is synonymous with strength, aggression, and the will to dominate and do violence to others; to be female is synonymous with weakness, passivity, and the will to nourish and affirm the lives of others. Such dualistic thinking is basic to all forms of social domination in Western society. Even when inverted and employed for a meaningful purpose such as nuclear disarmament, it is nevertheless dangerous because it reinforces the cultural basis of sexism and other forms of group oppression. It promotes a stereotypical notion of inherent differences between men and women, implying that women by virtue of their sex have played no crucial role in supporting and upholding imperialism (and the militarism that serves to maintain imperialist rule) or other systems of domination. Even if one argues that men have been taught to equate masculinity with the ability to do violence and women have been taught to equate femaleness with nurturance, the fact remains that many women and men do not conform to these stereotypes. Rather than clarifying for women the power we exert in the maintenance of systems of domination and setting forth strategies for resistance and change, most current discussion of feminism and militarism further mystifies women's role.

In keeping with the tenets of sexist ideology, women are talked about in these discussions as objects rather than subjects. We are depicted not as workers and activists, who, like men, make political choices, but as passive observers who have taken no responsibility for actively maintaining the value system of this society, which proclaims violence and domination the most effective tools of communication in human interaction, a value system that advocates and makes war. Discussions of feminism and militarism that do not clarify for women the roles we have played and play in all their variety and complexity make it appear that all women are against war and oppose the use of violence, and that men are the problem, the enemy. This is a distortion of women's experience, not a clarification of it or a redefinition. Devaluing the roles women have

played necessarily leads to a distorted perspective on women's reality. I use the word "devaluing," for it seems that the suggestion that men have made war and war policy while women have passively watched represents a refusal to see women as active political beings even when we are subordinate to men. The assumption that to be deemed inferior or submissive necessarily defines what one actually is or how one actually behaves is a continuation of sexist patterns that deny the relative powers women have exercised. Even the woman who votes according to her husband's example is making a political choice. We need to see women as political beings.

An example of the distorted perception of women's reality that is being described by some activists who discuss women and militarism is the popular assumption that "women are natural enemies of war." Many female anti-war activists suggest that women as bearers of children, or the potential bearers of children, are necessarily more concerned about ending war than men—the implication being that women are more life-affirming. Leslie Cagan, in a recent interview in *South End Press News*, confirms that women participating in disarmament work often suggest that because they bear children, they have a "special relationship and responsibility to the survival of the planet." Cagan maintains that this is a "dangerous perspective" because it focuses on women's biology and "tends to reinforce the sexist notion that womanhood equals motherhood." She explains:

It may be that some, even many, women are motivated to activism through concern for their children. It may also be a factor for some fathers who don't want to see their kids blown up in a nuclear war, either! But this simply doesn't justify a narrow and limiting perspective. It is limiting because it says that women's relationship to such an important issue as the future of our planet rests on a single biological fact.

We who are concerned about feminism and militarism must insist that women (even those who are bearers of children) are not inherently non-violent or life-affirming. Many women who mother (either as single parents or in camaraderie with husbands) have taught male children to see fighting and other forms of violent aggression as acceptable modes of communication, modes that are valued more than loving or caring interaction. Even though women often assume nurturing, life-affirming roles in their relationship to others, they do not necessarily value or respect that role as much as they revere the suppression of emotion or the assertion of power through the use of force. We must insist that women who do choose (even if they are inspired by motherhood) to denounce violence and domination and their ultimate expression, war, are political thinkers making political decisions and choices. If women who work against militarism continue to imply, however directly or indirectly, that there is an inherent predisposition in women to oppose war, they risk reinforcing the very biological determinism that is the philosophical foundation of notions of male supremacy. They also run the risk of covering up the reality that masses of women in the United States are not anti-imperialist, are not against militarism, and do not oppose the use of violence as a form of social control. Until these women change their values, they must be seen as clinging, like their male counterparts, to a perspective on human relationships that embraces social domination in all its various forms, and they must be held accountable for their actions.

Imperialism and not patriarchy is the core foundation of modern militarism (even though it serves the interest of imperialism to link notions of masculinity with the struggle to conquer nations and peoples). Many societies in the world that are ruled by males are not imperialistic; many women in the United States have made political decisions to support imperialism and militarism. Historically, white women in the United States working for women's rights have felt

no contradiction between this effort and their support of the Western imperialist attempt to conquer the planet. Often they argued that equal rights would better enable white women to help in the building of this “great nation,” i.e., in the cause of imperialism. Many white women in the early part of the twentieth century who were strong advocates of women’s liberation were pro-imperialist.

Books like Helen Montgomery’s *Western Women in Eastern Lands*, published in 1910, outlining fifty years of white women’s work in foreign missions, document the link between the struggle for the emancipation of white women in the United States and the imperialist, hegemonic spread of Western values and Western domination of the globe. As missionaries, white women traveled to Eastern lands armed with psychological weapons that undermined the belief systems of Eastern women and replaced them with Western values. In the closing statement of her work, Helen Montgomery writes:

So many voices are calling us, so many goods demand our allegiance, that we are in danger of forgetting the best. To seek first to bring Christ’s kingdom on the earth, to respond to the need that is sorest, to go out into the desert for that loved and bewildered sheep that the shepherd has missed from the fold, to share all of the privilege with the unprivileged and happiness with the unhappy, to see the possibility of one redeemed earth, undivided, unvexed, unperplexed resting in the light of the glorious Gospel of the blessed God, this is the mission of the women’s missionary movement.

Despite the fact that contemporary feminist movement against imperialism and militarism is headed by white women, they are a small minority and do not represent the values of the majority of white women in this society or of women as a whole. Many white women in the United States continue to wholeheartedly support militarism. Feminist activists must hold these women accountable for their political decisions and must also work to change their perspectives. We avoid this challenge when we act as if men and patriarchy are the sole evils.

It is a quite blatant truth that men commit the majority of imperialist acts globally, that men have committed the majority of violent acts in war. However, we must remember that when called to do so in times of national crisis, women fight in combat and are not necessarily opposed to war. We must also remember that war does not simply include fighting and that women’s effort on the home front and off the front lines has helped make war. At the end of her essay discussing women’s participation in war effort, “The Culture in Our Blood,” Patty Walton writes:

Women have not fought in wars because of our material circumstances and not because we are innately more moral than men or because of any biological limitation on our part. The work of women supports both a society’s war and its peace activities. And our support has always derived from our particular socialization as women. In fact, the socialization of women and men complements the needs of the culture in which we live. It is necessary to recognize this because we need to change these material relationships and not just the sex of our world problem-makers. Men are not more innately aggressive than women are passive. We have cultures of war, so we can have cultures of peace.

Sex-role divisions of labor have meant that as parents women have supported war effort by instilling in their children an acceptance of domination and a respect for violence as a means of social control. Implanting this ideology in human consciousness is as central to the making of a militaristic state as the overall control of males by ruling male groups who insist that men make war, and reward them for their efforts. Like men, women in the United States have a high tolerance for witnessing violence, learned through excessive television-watching. To fight militarism, we must resist the socialization and brainwashing that teaches passive acceptance of violence in daily life, that tells us violence can be eliminated with violence. Women who are

against militarism must withdraw support for war by working to transform passive acceptance of violence as a means of social control in everyday life.

This means that we must no longer act as if men are the only people who act violently, who accept and condone violence, who create a culture of violence. As women we must assume responsibility for the role women play in condoning violence. By only calling attention to male violence against women, or making militarism just another expression of male violence, we fail to adequately address the problem of violence and make it difficult to develop viable resistance strategies and solutions. (A fuller discussion of the impact of militarism on women's lives may be found in Cynthia Enloe's work *Does Khaki Become You?*) While we need not diminish the severity of the problem of male violence against women or male violence against nations or the planet, we must acknowledge that men and women have together made the United States a culture of violence and must work together to transform and recreate that culture. Women and men must oppose the use of violence as a means of social control in all its manifestations: war, male violence against women, adult violence against children, teenage violence, racial violence, etc. Feminist efforts to end male violence against women must be expanded into a movement to end all forms of violence. Broadly based, such a movement could potentially radicalize consciousness and intensify awareness of the need to end male domination of women in a context in which we are working to eradicate the idea that hierarchical structures should be the basis of human interaction.