Brian Martin, *Social Defence, Social Change*
(London: Freedom Press, 1993)

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A tool for feminists?

Even a brief examination shows that the military is a mainstay of male domination. Military personnel are predominantly men, and the hostility of many soldiers to women is notorious. Women joining the armed forces commonly encounter discrimination, harassment and rape.[1] But there is more than this to the connection between patriarchy and the military.

The military is the ultimate defender of the institutions of the state and capitalism, which are key mechanisms for male domination. The existence of political and administrative hierarchies provides an avenue for implementing male-oriented policies, and of course the politicians and top-level bureaucrats who implement these policies are mostly men. Similarly, in the economic sphere, corporate hierarchies provide a channel for male advancement, male power and male-oriented policies. A key feature of this system is a highly competitive, career-oriented public sphere which is highly valued, largely separate from the nurturing private sphere which is not an official part of the economic system. Policies characteristic of this system include the "family wage," single-track career advancement, lack of child care and a privatised home life.

The military and the police are the two institutions officially licensed to use violence. This generally is done in defence of the state and the most powerful social groups. Any other use of violence

[1] Cynthia Enloe, *Does Khaki Become You? The Militarisation of Women's Lives* (London: Pluto, 1983).

is officially considered criminal—except by men against women in their family, which is widely ignored, tolerated and, in many places, legal. This suggests the existence of a connection between patriarchy and the military at the level of a cultural acceptance of violence.

What strategies have a chance of undermining the mutually reinforcing systems of patriarchy and the military? Getting more women into the military is certainly *not* the answer. The connections between violence and masculinity are fundamental to patriarchy. More women in the military may help to reduce some of the worst exploitation of female soldiers, but it also will make those women subordinate to the masculine system of social control through violence. The liberal feminist solution of equal opportunity and equal representation of women in existing social institutions is doomed to failure. The military as a system must be challenged and abolished rather than joined.

For women to become guerrilla fighters is no better. In some liberation struggles, women have played an important combat role—though never have they approached an equal role at the top levels of command. In any case, those few guerrilla armies that have helped capture state power have been transformed, after "liberation," into orthodox military structures. The evidence shows that "national liberation" by armed struggle is not a promising road to liberation for women in the military nor, indeed, for those in civilian life.

Only the pressure of desperate struggle permits, *sometimes*, significant entry of women into combat roles. (The Israeli military is a good example here.) But when the pressure to survive is removed, women are quickly relegated to their usual subordinate positions.

The same applied to the prominent role of women in industry during World War II, when large numbers of men were in the armed forces. Women are allowed into men's jobs in times of necessity. Later, a roll-back to the status quo takes place.

Social defence, by contrast, provides a friendly framework both for an equal women's role and a feminist agenda—but only a social defence which is linked to challenges to the patriarchal structures of the state, capitalism and bureaucracy. In this model, women are empowered for nonviolent struggle in a nonhierarchical social

system. They are empowered both to defend against aggression and to oppose male domination.[2] This is a scenario compatible with radical feminism and anarchist feminism.

Feminism and social defence

The fact that social defence allows participation by everyone is a dramatic contrast with military combat troops, which are composed almost entirely of young fit men. So in this simple sense of potential participation, social defence is much more egalitarian and, among other things, open to women.

(A complicating factor in this analysis is the declining role of front-line combat troops in warfare and the increasing importance of technology. Women are just as capable as men of servicing a jet fighter or pressing a button to launch a nuclear missile. Modern technological warfare could just as easily be carried out by women. The continued predominance of men in traditional occupations within the military shows that male power is the key, not any special strength or skill of men. For that matter, it would be straightforward to design rifles or tanks so that women could operate on the front lines as effectively as men.)

Empowering women against male violence. There is more to women's participation in social defence than equal opportunity. One of the radical elements of participation in nonviolent struggle against aggression is that it requires and develops skills which can be used in *other* struggles. For women, that means struggles against male violence and patriarchal institutions.

Some of the methods of nonviolent action useful in social defence include persuading opponents to change their behaviour, applying psychological pressure by embarrassment or social ostracism, and applying economic or political pressure through adverse publicity or boycotts. If these and other methods can be used against enemy soldiers or collaborators, they can also be used, today, against male behaviours that oppress women.

For example, the usual action taken against a known rapist is either (1) nothing at all or, occasionally, (2) a court case and

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[2] Pam McAllister (ed.), *Reweaving the Web of Life: Feminism and Nonviolence* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1982).

sometimes a gaol sentence. Given that prisons seldom rehabilitate individuals and commonly teach them crime, neither (1) nor (2) is satisfactory.

A group of women (and perhaps some men), experienced in nonviolent action, could choose from a wide array of methods to confront a rapist. They might go to him in a group and demand an apology. They might publicise the man's actions through graffiti, leaflets and letters. They might talk to the man's family, friends and work colleagues. They might boycott his business. They might recommend counselling by groups such as "Men Against Rape." (This approach may sound ineffectual. But I don't think so, especially after reading how women in an Indian community organised against a rapist.[3])

The besieged man might protest that he is innocent and demand a hearing in court, knowing full well that court cases involve trauma for women who testify and seldom lead to a just solution to the problem. The women might instead develop their own procedure for hearing the different sides to the story, a procedure that is sensitive to all concerned.

Courts are systems for maintaining the social order. They rest on the power of the state to arrest and imprison. A society without the military would have to have nonviolent systems for dealing with crimes. Since men are responsible for most crime in today's society, systems based on feminist methods of empowerment and nonviolent social control seem an obvious way to proceed.

Social defence is concerned with collective nonviolent struggle. It is, after all, proposed as an alternative to military defence. But many women are primarily concerned with the violence of individual men, sometimes strangers but more commonly husbands, lovers, fathers and friends. Social defence does not say what to do about sexual assault, beatings and harassment.

Feminism and social defence can gain from each other. A message from women's struggles against male violence is that policies for social defence need to be extended to deal with interpersonal violence. What social defence can provide in this connection is

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[3] Ila Pathak and Amina Amin, "How women dealt with a rapist," *Third World Resurgence*, no. 10, June 1991, pp. 39-40.

skills and understanding of collective means of confronting violence.

Social offence for female emancipation. Feminists have many reasons to take up techniques of social offence to intervene in various parts of the world against oppression of women. There are many societies in which women are severely and systematically oppressed, for example by being sold into prostitution, forced to work long hours in dangerous factories, exploited and abused by husbands and male relatives, and subjected to genital mutilation.[4]

Women elsewhere can intervene against such practices by visits, publicity, boycotts, and a host of other techniques. Indeed, most of the methods of social offence against repressive regimes can be used against severe male oppression, and some new ones added.

One retort to such action is frequently heard: "we have no right to intervene in another society; we must respect other cultures." Intervention from white, wealthy countries seems uncomfortably like the old days of imperialism, colonialism and missionaries, all justified by "white men's burden" to save benighted natives from backwardness and sin. Are today's interventions really any different?

Respecting other cultures certainly is a good principle to keep in mind, but it should not override other more important principles, such as opposing exploitation, torture and killings. After all, some other "culture" might engage in ritual torture and execution. Few would tolerate such a cultural prerogative. Genocide is not acceptable just because it's happening within a single country. Intervention is justified in such cases.

The question then becomes, when does exploitation of women become serious enough to justify outside intervention? This is not easy to answer. There have been vigorous debates over female genital mutilation.[5] Opponents of Western intervention against the practice offer a number of arguments. They say that Western

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[4] Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978); Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour* (London: Zed Books, 1986).

[5] See, for example, Alison T. Slack, "Female circumcision: a critical appraisal," *Human Rights Quarterly*, vol. 10, 1988, pp. 437-486.

intervention is a cultural imposition, that it may be counterproductive, and that it is more appropriate to act against Western women's deformations of their own bodies, such as through cosmetic surgery. Supporters of intervention cite the adverse health consequences of female genital mutilation and the lack of informed consent by the females, most of whom are children.

A heavy-handed approach—such as passing laws and prosecuting offenders—could well be counterproductive. A more effective approach is grassroots educational campaigns, relying as much as possible on local opponents of female genital mutilation. Such an approach is also more compatible with the principles of nonviolent action.

Direct action for women's liberation. Much of the public struggle for women's liberation has been to change oppressive laws and policies. For example, the struggle for reproductive rights—including the choice of different methods of contraception, and abortion—has been waged through courts and legislatures. The keys to ensuring women's reproductive choices are seen as supportive laws and policies.

Ironically, this means relying on male-dominated institutions: the medical profession, politicians, government bureaucracies. Women are placed in the position of being clients, petitioners and lobbyists. Their own skills in taking action directly are left undeveloped.

Another approach is for women to develop and practise the skills to control reproduction. Women's health groups have shown that women who are not physicians are quite capable of carrying out safe abortions. Women might decide to develop networks for production and distribution of the "abortion pill" RU-486. In other words, women should be ready to take direct action to control their fertility, rather than relying entirely on laws and policies.[6] Such a strategy is quite in keeping with the "alternative institutions" strand of nonviolent action.

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[6] Liz A. Highleyman, "Reproductive freedom in everyday life," *Love & Rage*, vol. 3, no. 2, February 1992, p. 6; Lisa Loving, "The abortion underground," *Kick It Over*, #29, Summer 1992, pp. 15-18; Julius A. Roth, "A sour note on *Roe* vs. *Wade*," *Research in the Sociology of Health Care*, vol. 9, 1991, pp. 3-8.

It is impossible, in this context, to avoid mentioning the struggles over abortion, including major confrontations at abortion clinics, especially in the United States. Many opponents of abortion consider it to be murder and believe that extreme means are justified to stop it. Proponents of having a choice of abortion do not see it as murder. They believe that a foetus is not yet a human or not yet a "life worth living."

The conflict is complicated by connections with other attitudes and stands. A large fraction of opponents of abortion fully support military preparedness and wars, and also oppose measures such as sex education and free contraceptives which, arguably, would reduce the demand for abortion. Antiwar activists are more likely to support the availability of abortion, and refer to the oppression of women and the blighted lives of children that are associated with lack of reproductive choice. There are a few groups which combine an antiwar and antiabortion stance.

The periodical *The Nuclear Resister* is produced to document and support those who have been arrested for opposing nuclear power and nuclear weapons. In one issue the editors included annual figures for those arrested for opposing abortion—a figure greater than all nuclear-related arrests—for the purpose of comparison, not advocacy. This caused an outpouring of passionate letters, some criticising the editors for even mentioning antiabortionists in the same context as antinuclear activists, others pointing to the covert use of violent methods by antiabortionists.[7]

It is certainly true that both sides in the dispute primarily use nonviolent methods.[8] But both sides also look to the state as an actual or potential ally in their cause. They would like to have the law on their side and have the police arrest and, if necessary, imprison those who resist laws supporting their own position.

In a society without formal violent sanctions, the struggle over abortion would be waged almost entirely with nonviolent methods.

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[7] *The Nuclear Resister* (PO Box 43383, Tucson AZ 85733, USA), no. 60, 15 February 1989, p. 2 and no. 61/62, 2 May 1989, pp. 2-3, 12-13.

[8] Victoria Johnson, in an unpublished paper, argues that the approach used by Operation Rescue systematically differs from both principled and pragmatic nonviolence, and calls it "quasi-nonviolence." She can be contacted at the Department of Sociology, University of California, Davis CA 95616, USA.

It could still be vehement! I don't know how the struggle would be resolved. I'd like to imagine that abortion could be minimised while women gained maximum control over their own lives, including sexual activity and reproduction. Or, perhaps, different communities would arrive at different decisions; those strongly disagreeing would be free to move away.

Could social defence be patriarchal? In theory, a strong system of social defence would mean that women were trained in skills of nonviolent action and, therefore, that these skills could be used in struggles to liberate women from male oppression. But practice is often quite different from theory. Capitalism, representative democracy and state socialism are each gender-neutral—in theory. In practice, these systems have been patriarchal: dominated by men and operating to oppress women. Why should social defence be any different?

It is quite possible to imagine a social defence system in which:

- most of the key planners and decision-makers are men;
- there are experts who are crucial to the resistance, such as skilled factory workers, computer programmers and gifted communicators, most of whom are men;
- most of those on the "front line" in confrontations are men, while most women stay at home with the children.

With government-implemented social defence, Sharp-style, this pattern would be inevitable: one male-dominated defence establishment would be replaced by another. But it's also possible with a grassroots approach to social defence. After all, many anti-establishment groups are just as patriarchal as the organisations they hope to replace.

All this points to a simple conclusion. Social defence groups must incorporate a feminist agenda and social defence should be taken up by feminist groups. Although this is a "simple conclusion," doing it in practice is an enormous challenge.

"Surely you wouldn't just sit and do nothing while soldiers raped your mother or your wife?" Questions such as this are often tossed at supporters of nonviolence.

Response 1. I would do my best to use nonviolent methods to prevent and stop rape. Using violence might make the situation worse (see John H. Yoder, *What Would You Do?*, Scottdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1983).

Response 2. That isn't the real issue. Social defence is about the collective defence of a society, and whether nonviolence is a better way to do this.

Response 3. Military systems are a major contributor to rape, not a solution. Armies are commonly involved in rape of civilians as well as killing and looting. Many female soldiers and wives are raped in "peacetime." Anything that helps to remove or replace military systems also helps to reduce rape.

Response 4. Most rapes in our society are by people known to the woman—especially husbands. There is also a much higher rate of child sexual abuse—by male relatives, especially fathers—than most people realise. Scare-mongering about rape by strangers, including enemy soldiers, diverts attention from the most important issue, male domination. Armies are male dominated, and can only contribute to the problem.

Response 5. Almost all combat soldiers are men, and armies are masculine institutions. Associated with this, women are often expected to be passive and are not encouraged to develop their skills at resistance.

Social defence challenges this pattern. It involves both men and women developing skills for nonviolent struggle. Many of the things involved in developing social defence—including developing support networks, nonviolent action skills and individual and community self-reliance—can also be used to act against rape.

It is a challenge for us to develop campaigns against rape that are linked with campaigns towards social defence. There are some positive connections, unlike the situation with military defence.

Response 6. If there's a military coup, what are *you* going to do to stop rape by soldiers—especially when they threaten to shoot the woman if you resist?