

keeping the fires burning

jacklyn cock

As the militarisation of South African society proceeds, the involvement of white women is planned and controlled to serve military goals, argues Jacklyn Cock. Her National Conference paper applies a feminist critique to the mass of authentic detail linking women and militarisation in South Africa and elsewhere. Here are some extracts.

The linkages between women and the process of militarisation are mystified by two opposing analyses - those of sexism and feminism. Both analyses exclude women from war on the grounds of 'special qualities'. Sexism excludes women on the grounds of their physical inferiority and unsuitability for combat roles. One variant of feminism excludes women on opposite grounds, that of women's innate nurturing qualities, their creativity and pacifism. The outcome of both positions is that war is understood as a totally male affair.

In a civil war or struggle such as that being waged in contemporary South Africa, the landscape of combat is redrawn as the experience of war is dispersed among the general population. In this process an important breach in the ideological constructions of gender is threatened. As Ruddick



Cape Times.

has written: 'Dividing the protector from the protected, defender from defended, is the linchpin of masculinist as well as military ideology.' Therefore, considerable efforts are made to avoid this breach and elaborate a traditional but expanded notion of femininity for women within the SADF.

White women are incorporated into the militarisation of South African society by means of direct and indirect incorporation. The direct incorporation is clear in the increasing use of white women within the SADF in a variety of roles. At the indirect material level, there are three linkages between women and war: firstly, through organisations such as the Southern Cross Fund, which provides food parcels and recreational services for 'the boys on the border', and Operation Ride Safe, which is used to or-

ganise lifts for national servicemen; secondly, in Civil Defence and Commando units; and thirdly, they are engaged in armaments production for Armscor. Another indirect linkage is that they provide a crucial source of ideological support. They elaborate an ideology of gender roles which links masculinity to militarism.

The extent to which the wife is incorporated in her soldier-husband's role is best illustrated by the Johannesburg City Council's decision to restrict paid maternity leave to women employees whose husbands were presently doing or had done military service. Those to be excluded were 'specifically the wives of religious objectors' as well as all blacks, coloureds, Indians and single women. (After numerous objections were lodged, the decision was dropped.)

It is significant that the increasing



A presentation of Easter Eggs to soldiers at the Wynberg Military Hospital by office-holders of the Cape Province Branch of the Southern Cross Fund.

incorporation of women as a minority of the armed forces has not seriously breached the ideology of gender roles or the sexual division of labour. The most common functions women fulfil in militaries are clerical, administrative and servicing. These are jobs very similar to those held by women in the wider labour market. They do not contaminate the ideology of femininity which reinforces the sexual division of labour. It is therefore difficult to see how this increasing use of women as a military resource can be hailed as advancing equality between the sexes.

The linkages between women and war are complex and straddle contradictions which are embedded deep in the peculiar social conditions of South Africa. While white women are contributing to the process of militarisation, white women are also more

active than white men in the extra-parliamentary struggle against apartheid. While the politics of gender is often used to deny the validity of women's independent autonomous political action, paradoxically it also gives them space for such action.

The obvious question that arises is whether the ideological construction of 'manpower' will be restructured to include white women. Generally, conscription for women is still rare anywhere. Future policy will hinge on the tension between the need to mobilise women as soldiers under the pressure of manpower shortages and increasing resistance and the need to avoid any contamination or dilution of the ideological construct of 'femininity'. This construct is crucial as a source of legitimation for the connection between masculinity and militarism. □

Some Quotes...

Jacklyn's paper was full of telling quotes. We re-print a few of them below.

'Traditional notions of femininity are not abandoned [in the incorporation of women in the defence force]. For example, on one occasion where the Soutpansberg Military Area Commando gathered for an evaluation, the evening included a fashion show.

'Bidding to take the best dressed category the women's teams paraded in a variety of coloured outfits. Red bush-hat cum stetson, safari suit pulled in with red leather belt and red pumps was about the best' said a Colonel Swanepoel in Paratus, Vol 38 No 2 February 1987.

On another occasion during the evaluation:

'Ouma Marina Hogenboezen strode into the evaluation with a rifle under her left arm and pick-nick (sic) basket in her right hand, and said, "Shooting comes as naturally as baking in the kitchen". (Ibid.)

Soldiers [are seen to] enjoy a status in the community and their lady friends [are expected to be] an asset to them, even if they are only doing shopping together. Certain standards are expected of him when wearing his uniform and the same applies to the woman accompanying him. Therefore the following was recommended by Mrs Emsie Schoeman, in an address given to the SA Army Ladies Organisation at Buffelspoort in 1980:

'For a formal dinner... a light material (chiffon) long dress, little jewellery, court shoes in either gold or satin and matching handbag. For visiting town... a neatly tailored outfit. Court shoes and handbag. Sandals can be worn if feet are well looked after and carefully manicured.'

One More Quote...

'Happiness always has a woman in the picture. In the first place, happiness is a woman who knows who has made her...

Happiness also is a woman who knows why she was made...

Happiness is also a woman who knows to whom she belongs...

Happiness is also a woman who is not naïve about the enemy's attack on the Republic of South Africa.' - Mrs Viljoen, wife of the then Head of the SADF, General Constand Viljoen, quoted in Paratus, Vol. 34, No 7, July 1983.



Mrs Constand Viljoen, wife of the former Chief of the Defence Force, with two soldiers launching 'South Africa's biggest cake bake.'

Cape Times

...and Some Questions

There are several important questions that flow from Jacklyn's paper. She has agreed to deal with them in a future issue of SASH. We set out some of them here:

Applying a feminist analysis to the role of women and the military potentially raises a major contradiction. The logical conclusion of the feminist argument is that women are as competent as men at waging war and should not be incorporated into the military merely in 'traditional female roles'. This brand of feminism rejects the notion that women are 'bearers of special qualities' that make them inherently different from men. Yet, at the same time, the analysis condemns the role that women are playing in the country's militarisation, suggesting that they are being manipulated by male militarist ideology. Is it possible to resolve this contradiction?

At one point, the paper cites a moving plea by the International Women's Suffrage Alliance, in 1914 to avert war: 'In this terrible hour, when the fate of Europe depends on decisions which women have no power to shape, we, realising our responsibilities as mothers of the race, cannot stand passively by. Powerless though we are politically...' Else-



Cadets at a Republic celebration, Durban 1981.

Paul Weinberg

where, the paper gives prominence to the claim that 'Women at all times have been victims of war, and not its perpetrators.' White South African women no longer have that let-out. Now that we have the 'power to shape' decisions which the vote confers, what is still required for women to shed the stigma of implied helplessness?

There is strong reference to E.P. Thompson's 'crucial insight' into the way military institutions and ideas 'contaminate' societies. The paper relates this to the South African context, with particular reference to the SADF and the role white women play in supporting it. The logical follow-up question is whether children and youth who march with wooden rifles in townships or glorify Umkhonto we Sizwe, are part of the process of military 'contamination'? Or does the fact that they lack access to legitimate and democratic means of change justify a different analytic framework?

There is criticism of the 'degree of support - both ideological and material' which many white women provide to members of the SADF. But is it possible for women in these structural circumstances to be anything but supportive to, say, their sons or husbands? Even women who are opposed to conscription - and the role of the SADF - are supportive of their conscripted family members. By turning human fidelity into an unacceptable trait, is there not the risk of alienating people who, if the problem were differently expressed, might recognise the validity of the point being made? □