

Women and War: Lest We Forget

Through all the years of school in the isolated Outback Australian mining town of Broken Hill, one of the rituals I most vividly remember is the annual commemoration of the end of World War I. In Australia, WWI is particularly associated with the ANZAC (Australian and New Zealand Army Corps) soldiers. Every year at 11am on the 11th day of the 11th month, Australians bow their heads in silence to pay tribute to the young Australian men who endured months of senseless slaughter, and the subsequent silent, covert withdrawal after months of stalemated deadly, futile battle. Generations of Australians since equally pay tribute to the humanity and courage under fire of men thrown into such tragic circumstances, who still managed to maintain their human connection with each other – friends and enemies alike.



On this November 11, almost 100 years after those ‘men’ – many still teenagers – I particularly remember standing before a sea of some 2000 student and teachers at our high school (we were large, our school serviced thousands of square miles of rural outback Australian communities) to commemorate those who had fought at Gallipoli and so many other theatres of war since that “war to end all wars.” My role was to recite the last verse of Ode to Remembrance, or Lest We Forget. Despite, as an English Literature major at university and in the decades since then, having learned a plethora of poems, plays and other writings, in the decades since then, the words of Lest We Forget remain indelibly imprinted in my mind:

*They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning,
We will remember them.*

We do remember them. We remember the men and women who have fought in all the wars since 1915. We remember those who are fighting in the 40 or so armed conflicts that are raging today in various parts of the world, particularly in Iraq and Afghanistan. We remember them at commemoration ceremonies like those at my high school. We remember them with every new media story of another death in combat.

But we often fail to remember the hidden casualties of war. The women who experience armed conflict in a multitude of ways not necessarily in the direct line of military fire. We don't remember enough, the women who carry the immeasurable weight of grief of their loved ones who died in those wars, nor the often sustained distress of those who devote the rest of their lives to caring for their soldiers who return wounded. We often forget the women, who through the ages have carried the war within them, etched into their very beings, but still kept the home fires burning, raising their children, carving out a living as a single parent, often while still under horrendous war conditions, keeping their families together, despite their own pain and suffering. We rarely remember the hundreds of thousands of refugees who fled their homes in attempt to find safety, only to find their new lives (often in refugee camps) filled with equally horrendous challenges, some forced into poverty, prostitution and suicide to escape their daily suffering. We consistently find it too hard to remember the very young women, who at ages as young as 8 and 9, were forced from their homes and villages to become child combatants. And we regrettably fail to remember those women who paid an untold price with their souls and their bodies, when armed soldiers raped them as a systematic weapon of war.

Recently, the United Nations (UN) revealed yet another convulsion of violence against women in Eastern Congo. Only three years ago the UN reported that sexual assaults on women escalated to a scale never before seen, even in the bloody history of that violence-ridden country. A recent intensely savage attack on the small community of Luvingi in which at least 200 women of the 2000 villagers were raped, some as old as 80, sickeningly shows sexual violence still runs rampant. Sexual brutality against women cuts deep into the most fundamental aspect of our humanity – violence at the very core of our regeneration of the human species. Sexual violence against women can be searingly effective in subduing whole communities while they live in fear and distress; effective at ethnic cleansing by 'mixing the blood lines' of particular communities, invoking shame that violates the women and humiliates the men who cannot protect them. Sadly, sexual violence metastasizes into a wider social fracture, sometimes destroying entire regions because the trauma and stigma remain long after the violent act – as one Croatian journalist said: "not forgotten, not forgiven."

War also impacts women in more indirect covert ways. This week, the New York Times reported a story about a surging epidemic of suicides among women in Afghanistan whose daily lives continue with war as the ever-present backdrop. Set against a landscape littered with tragic tales of horrific suffering, some tormented women see no escape except through a brutal death at their own hands – using readily available gasoline to burn themselves alive. In parts of the Middle East, other women have gathered their few belongings and families and fled to what they hoped would be more peaceful, hopeful futures, only to find their new realities equally although differently despairing. To survive, they turn to sex work. For others, the distress is too acute, and their minds and bodies dwindle away in slow, painful and sustained psychosocial suffering.

So for the rest of us women who may take for granted that we can sleep in our own comfortable beds at night, and all the accompanying luxuries of our first world lifestyles, it is our responsibility as members of the world sisterhood, to say something, to do something – to attempt to stop women's bodies and brains from being the battleground for men's wars. Lest we forget those women who daily carry the burden of the horror they endured living in a war zone. Lest we forget the price some women pay when the warzone is inside their own body. Lest we forget those women who stoically carry on, raising their children and tending their community. Lest we forget those women who bravely return to their communities despite stigma and shame about what they have suffered. Lest we forget that each of us can do something, however small.....