

# "Be a man"

## Willingness to serve and masculinity

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### Introduction I

I want to start with an autobiographical note. When I was about 13 or 14 – and the army still a long way ahead – I was quite fascinated with technology, as many young boys are. I even remember during one holiday going to a Navy open day, looking at the different Navy ships, helicopters, etc... I could be fascinated by this technology, but I didn't think much of myself in a uniform, and being part of the Navy. At that time these two things were quite separate issues.

Once I got a bit older, the reality of having to serve in the military got closer. And increasingly I could not see myself running around in a uniform, being shouted at, and being part of an all-male and very macho environment. I was at that time experiencing an almost all-male environment during my apprenticeship as an electrician, and could never relate to the sexist talk and macho posture. Not that I was the big conscious anti-sexist at that time, but I just couldn't relate to it. This was just for eight hours a day, five days a week, but thinking about something like this 24/7, without any space to escape, felt more like horror to me.

I wasn't aware of being gay at that time, but had already experienced quite a bit of peer harassment for not taking part in dirty sexist talks, and other macho posture, during my last years at school. Again, military service just felt like exponentially worse.

So, when the time came, I opted for conscientious objection. Of course, there were also political reasons for the objection, but I think on a different level my deeply felt aversion against this masculine environment might have been more important at that time. My unwillingness to serve was deeply connected to the images of masculinity linked with the military, which I felt very uncomfortable about.

### Introduction II

Willingness to serve is not only an issue when we have the right to conscientious objection in a conscription army. It is an issue too in countries that have conscription and do not provide for conscientious objection, and maybe even more so in countries with in principal voluntary Armed Forces. In this presentation, I want to look at some of these issues, and ask the question what this might mean for the antimilitarist movement. I don't necessarily want to provide answers here – my aim is to raise awareness.

## Masculinity and military service

*"Wars and militaries are organised around a socially constructed masculinity that is defined by discrimination and humiliation of women and gays, and a mentality of conquest. We, as women and men homosexuals, we stand against heterosexism, patriarchy, and militarism, which are closely allied with one another"* (KaosGL 2002).

This statement from Kaos GL in Turkey puts a whole system of relationships into two sentences. Jeff Hearn writes: *"It is an understatement to say that men, militarism, and the military are historically, profoundly, and blatantly interconnected"* (Hearn 2003). But he also points out: *"The exact nature of the connections between men and the military are themselves various and plural – thus there are military masculinities, and not just military masculinity"* (emphasis in original). R. Connell explains it this way: *"The relationship of masculinity to violence is more complex than appears at first sight. Institutionalised violence (e.g., by armies) requires more than one kind of masculinity. The gender practice of the general is different from the practice of the front-line soldier, and armies acknowledge this by training them separately"* (Connell 1995).

Emma Sinclair-Webb links the issue of masculinities with class. She writes: *"As has been shown in various studies of masculinity, class background is highly significant when it comes to questions of how different images of masculinity are valued: physical endurance and stamina which go with labouring or factory-floor jobs are inevitably more valued qualities among working-class men for whom their bodies and the skill of their hands are their main economic assets than they are for white-collar men working in office environments where 'knowledges' of certain technologies and organizational principles are what are valued. In this sense, it is perhaps conceivable that those who have had the advantages that generally go with their class of*

prolonged education and immersion in a cultural formation that prepared them not for physical work, but taught them to view their identity as deriving its meanings – masculine and other – from different kinds of 'knowledges' and sources of 'cultural capital', proof of masculinity through the physical endurance tests of military service holds less appeal". (Sinclair-Webb 2000)

However, all this has not always been the case, and is in fact quite recent. Joanne Nagel shows that for the United States the connection between militarised form of masculinity – the ideal of soldiering – goes back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Nagel 1998). In Germany, this process happened in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century – German bourgeois masculinity, which was not convinced of military service, had to be reshaped and militarised. At that time, as Ute Frevert points out, "*the male gender character more and more incorporated soldier-like elements. Military values and assumptions on order ... thus more and more became the general ideal for the male nation*" (Frevert 1996). Similar arguments can be made for the construction of Jewish masculinities through the Zionist project.

## Willingness to serve

While this might all be a bit abstract, it is very concrete for young people. *Hanne-Margret Birckenbach*, a German peace researcher, did some extensive research on "willingness to serve among youth" involving a range of interviews (Birckenbach 1985). To put this research into context: Germany is a country with obligatory military service, and the right to conscientious objection, including a substitute civilian service.

In her conclusions, she writes: "*Those willing to serve expect that military service helps them to become an adult man. Serving in the military is connected to the expectation that this provides masculinity and with it the right and power for a natural ruling role. But the image of masculinity of these youth is in no way directed towards proving themselves in military combat, but towards mastering challenges in civilian everyday life, especially work life.*" (Birckenbach 1985, p230)

And: "*Conscientious objection and civilian service make insecure the usually civilian orientation of those willing to serve, which is linked to an ideal of masculinity (...). Part of this ideal of masculinity is to prove ones ability to defence and violence in fantasy, in games, and in military service. Exactly this is threatened by conscientious objectors, because they are seen as agents of the ban on violence. In the eyes of these youth, conscientious objectors in the first place don't refuse military service, but this ideal of masculinity.*" (Birckenbach 1985, p233)

In short: "*Under the disguise of 'no to killing – yes to killing for the purpose of defence' conscientious objectors and those willing to perform military service do not only fight about military violence, but also – without knowing – about ideals of masculinity*" (Birckenbach 1986). Bartjes argues that compulsory military service forces young men to opt for different models of masculinity when they make their decision about serving or not (Bartjes 1996).

It is important to note that this research had been done in a country that – at that time – did not and was not expected to participate in any military operation, not to speak of war.

Ayşe Gül Altınay comes to similar conclusions in relation to Turkey. She quotes a young man, Ibrahim, as saying: "*You do not become a man until you serve in the military. It is a sacred obligation. And people make fun of those who have not served. I, for one, did it just because I would feel a lack without it. I am flat-footed. If I had wanted, I could have been excused from military service. But I did not want to be excused. So I did it*" (Altınay 2006, p82). Altınay concludes, very similar to Birckenbach for the German context 20 years earlier: "*In this context, military service is not only, or perhaps not even primarily, seen as a service to the state, but one that defines proper masculinity. It is a rite of passage to manhood (...)*".

Similarly Uta Klein for Israel, referring to Rela Mazali: "*For Israeli Jewish males, military service is an inherent part of maturation, a rite of passage to male adulthood. Military service is seen as essential to a boy's right to belong to the inner circle of adult males.*" (Klein 1999, 1999b, Mazali 1998)

Kaplan quotes a gay former soldier as saying: "*I look at people who haven't served and they are still kids. I look at myself – I feel it made me more mature. It's not just pure machismo, it's a process of maturation*" (Kaplan 2000).

However, Birckenbach makes an important point. Initiation is a process that is aimed at the establishment of identification with certain forms of masculinity and traditional social culture. She argues that military service fails to fulfil the role of an initiation rite, because the society, into which it could initiate with its traditional military rites, does no longer exist (Birckenbach 1985, p120). However, she argues, this model of society did not completely disappear, but continues to exist in fantasies. Military service thus does not initiate a young man into real society, but into a socially constructed, backwards oriented illusionary world.

At a conference on conscientious objection in Istanbul Cynthia Enloe pointed out in one of the discussions that when we talk about conscientious objectors, we also need to talk about the women around them: mothers, girlfriends, other female peers, etc... This is equally true when we talk about the willingness to serve.

In Turkey, it is a common statement that it is impossible to marry unless someone has done his military service, based on the assumption that neither would a woman want to marry a man who did not do his military service, nor would the woman's family agree to such a marriage (Altınay 2004, Sinclair-Webb 2000). Klein quotes an Israeli woman saying "*I know that I prefer men who are combat soldiers to others who are just jobniks*" (Klein 1999b).

Birckenbach's research also shows that girls – in 1980s Germany – expected boys to serve in the military, and preferred those serving in the military and not conscientious objectors (Birckenbach 1982).

Obviously, societies, and with them masculinities, are changing. When Birckenbach did her research in Germany in the early 1980s, the number of CO applications stood at 40,000-60,000 annually, compared to more than double this number nowadays. Conscientious objection then was more an exception, especially for lower educated youth, and military service was the norm. Nowadays, it can almost be argued that military service is the exception, as the majority does either not serve at all, or does substitute civilian service. However, those who do serve are more likely to come from a lower class and education background, where masculinities oriented towards physical strength are more dominant.

## Changing masculinities

It is important to be aware that hegemonic masculinity is changing, away from the "warrior" image, towards a more professional business masculinity. This is not to say that traditional, on physical strength oriented masculinities do no longer exist – they certainly do – but that they lose their status as the hegemonic form of masculinity.

As Melissa T. Brown points out: *The Army "has offered men several versions of masculinity: the soldier firing high-tech weapons, the professional who makes important decisions under tough conditions and saves lives, the caring surrogate father and provider of relief and protection, the bearer of marketable skills, and, of course, the guy who successfully gets into his girlfriend's bedroom."* (Brown 2002)

Of course, masculinity is only ONE aspect when men or boys make their decision about military service, or joining the military voluntarily. Economic aspects should not be undervalued – military service is often a prerequisite for a career in civilian life, and leads to the connections needed for moving quickly into positions of power. Or signing up voluntarily is seen as the only way to get out of poverty, or to get higher education.

## Conclusions

Masculinity is one important aspect which leads people to serve in the military, be this an "all-volunteer" force or a conscription army with or without the right to conscientious objection. It is one factor which is exploited by military recruitment propaganda, but which is mostly ignored by antimilitarists or peace movement activists in our work.

However, I don't think we can afford the luxury of continuing to ignore issues of gender in our antimilitarist work. As Cynthia Enloe writes: "*As we have accumulated more and more evidence from more and more societies, we have become increasingly confident in this assertion that to omit gender from any explanation how militarization occurs, is not only to risk a flawed political analysis; it is to risk, too, a perpetually unsuccessful campaign to roll back that militarization*" (Enloe 1988).

I hope that this seminar will contribute to some practical solutions.

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