

Journalists, Writers, and Activists: International Women's Alliances During the Vietnam War (1954-1975)*

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Abstract

This paper analyses how female journalists, writers, and activists disputed meanings of the Vietnam War (1954-1975). The article portrays women's movements in the US and Vietnamese contexts, exploring the transnational movement of ideas, people, and political activism they promoted. As a hypothesis, it affirms that the articulation between concepts of gender, war, and peace were at the base of convergences and differences that helped to modulate the transnational alliances of women, and to circulate their ideas.

Keywords: Gender, Post-colonial Studies, Women and war, Social Theory.

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1. Introduction

Examining the participation of British women in World War I (1914-1918), Virginia Woolf (1938) questioned if they could be frontline combatants; remain defenseless at home; undertake activities to support the war – producing guns, clothing or food; or if they would have a particular place for producing and putting their ideas in motion.

While the twentieth century was marked by countless wars of various scales and impacts, views of them were strongly marked by images and allusions indicating that wars are, above all, male realms of action, strategy, and decision-making. However, several investigations and studies of wars and armed conflicts have helped bring to the analytical foreground the participation of women in conflicts, such as the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and World War II (1939-1945)¹.

Associated with this issue, as different authors point out (Jayawardena, 1986; Yuval-Davis, 1997; McClintock, 1993), the participation of women in national mobilization efforts like wars is usually recalled or celebrated as being ineloquent or barely incisive. Discussing efforts to read the history of war as a history of the production of gender differences, this article profiles the participation of US and Vietnamese women in the Vietnam War (1954-1975), analyzing the international movement of a few writers, journalists and activists between the United States and North and South Vietnam and how they gradually established homologies between the experiences, ways of life and daily lives of women involved on both sides of the conflict, bringing together efforts to tell their own story as part of the war and its associated contradictions.

Firstly, the paper examines reporting by the journalist Martha Gellhorn and the writers Mary McCarthy and Susan Sontag, analyzing how their texts helped organize the debate about the war, especially for the US public. Next, it analyzes established international solidarity networks, especially those among three organizations: the Vietnamese Women's Union of Liberation (WUL)², a member of the National Front for the Liberation of the South (NLF), the Women's Union (WU)³, linked to the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP), and in the US the Women Strike for Peace (WSP)⁴.

Except for Gellhorn, the writers and activists were involved in an international network circulating people and ideas that promoted seminars, encounters in different parts of the world, and trips to war zones by activists, journalists, artists, lawyers, and writers of various nationalities.

Thus, this article organizes two levels of analysis dedicated to reconstructing aspects of a single circuit within which notions of gender, war and peace influence each other, helping to organize a political and cultural imaginary against the war. The investigation of this circuit allows analyzing various strategies of the Women's Union of Liberation, the Women's Union, and Women Strike for Peace (WSP) to open space in the international public debate about the Vietnam conflict, and to look for zones of political influence, especially in diplomatic bodies around the world and in state and federal legislatures in the US.

¹ Regarding the participation of women in the Spanish Civil War, see Fyrth & Alexander (2008); Lines (2011). For World War II: Summerfield (1998); Schneider (2015); Aleksievitch (2016).

² Founded in 1960, the activities of Women's Union of Liberation were focused on the overthrow of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and, consequently on the reunification of the country. While the presence of members of the Communist Party of Vietnam was widespread in both the Women's Union of Liberation and the National Liberation Front, neither of the two organizations were formally affiliated with the party.

³ Founded in 1935, the Women's Union combined a varied set of activities associated with women, promoting a progressive articulation between anti-colonial struggle, communism and female autonomy. The organization remains active until day and, among other activities, maintains the Vietnamese Women's Museum, in Hanoi. Part of the archive is dedicated to reconstructing the participation of women in the various conflicts and wars the country faced in its history.

⁴ Founded in 1961, Women Strike for Peace advocated pacifism and demilitarization. At its first national conference in 1962, in Ann Arbor, Michigan, the movement issued the following declaration: "we are women of all races, creeds and political persuasions. We are dedicated to the purpose of general and complete disarmament. We demand that nuclear tests be banned forever, that the arms race end and the world abolish all weapons of destruction under United Nations safeguards. We cherish the Historical Introduction right and accept the responsibility to act to influence the course of government for peace. We join with women throughout the world to challenge the right of any nation or group of nations to hold the power of life and death over the world" (*Women Strike for Peace Records / The Swarthmore College Peace Collection*).

The Vietnam War lasted twenty-one years and pitted US military forces, which were allied to the government of the Republic of Vietnam in the South, against the forces of national liberation and reunification consolidated in the National Liberation Front, organized mainly, but not exclusively, in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, in the North of the country⁵.

The contingencies of the conflict also deepened contradictions derived from the processes of decolonization, not only of the country, but also of the so-called Third World in general (Sohat, 1994; Afshar, 1996). The war thus occupied the imaginary of the social struggles and demands for rights, especially between the late 1960s and early 1970s, in different parts of the world, mobilizing broad and heterogeneous solidarity networks that included movements for pacifism, anti-imperialism and the right of peoples to self-determination (Maeda, 2012).

In the case of the United States, a domestic context marked by the emergence of various demands for civil rights, and antiracist and feminist struggles, made the war a central issue not only for the country's foreign policy. The war especially shook domestic affairs, affecting the way demands for racial and gender equality were perceived, and disputed (Swerdlow, 1992; Lucks, 2014; Nguyễn, 2016; Frazier, 2017).

Although it is not within the scope of this paper, it is important to emphasize that US and Vietnamese women were present in war zones in a variety of capacities. A little more than 1,000 women from the United States were in Vietnam as non-combatants, that is, in positions as officers, nurses or doctors in the US Army, Air Force, Navy and Marines (Norman, 1990; Stur, 2011). While Vietnamese women (both from the North and the South) were organized in a large number of mixed or exclusively feminine military units, such as the *Dong Phuong Hong women's military platoon*, the *Trang Liet women's guerilla group*, the *Ngu Thuy female artillery company* and the *8th March women's artillery group*, in addition to participating in logistical and support capacities, approximately 11,000 women engaged directly on the battlefronts (Chaguri; Paniz, 2019).

US and Vietnamese women took part in the conflict between the two nations in a broader and more direct way than British women did during World War I. As the next two sections explore, they participated precisely on the various fronts described by Virginia Woolf in her reflection about the possibilities of women's action during a war.

2. The battlefronts of texts

Throughout the Vietnam War, the administrations of Presidents John F. Kennedy (1961-1963), Lyndon B. Johnson (1963-1969) and Richard Nixon (1969-1974) – despite their differences – justified the conflict by alleging a need to offer an alternative to the advance of communism, specifically represented by the figures of Ho Chi Minh and the People's Army (or Viet Cong in US terminology).

However, the extension of the conflict in time and space, as well as the generality and vagueness of the objectives to be achieved, combined with a domestic situation of exploding civil rights movements, and at their core, debates about racism, sexism, homophobia and imperialism, all made the US incursion into Vietnam controversial and the target of countless and persistent criticisms.

Although in far lesser numbers than men, women writers and journalists became war correspondents, or wrote about the conflict, for some of the major media outlets of the time, such as *The New York Times*, the *National Broadcasting Company* (NBC), the *Associated Press*, *Newsweek* and *United Press International* (Elwood-Akers, 1988).

For the themes and problems discussed here, texts by Martha Gellhorn, Mary McCarthy and Susan Sontag were singled out. McCarthy and Sontag traveled to the front at the invitation and intermediation of the Women's Union, that is they were part of the organization's efforts to promote trips by foreign journalists, activists, lawyers and writers to Hanoi and its surroundings, enabling

⁵ The war broke out after the Geneva Conference (1954), which both celebrated the end of the First Indochina War (1947-1954) and divided Vietnamese territory, recognizing, in the north, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, with its capital in Hanoi, and establishing the state of Vietnam in the southern zone, with its capital in former Saigon, present-day Ho Chi Minh City.

visits to battlefields and observation of the daily lives of the combatants. Gellhorn was one of the most experienced voices to cover the war, having arrived in Vietnam as an independent journalist with experience as a correspondent in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and World War II (1939-1945).

Martha Gellhorn arrived in South Vietnam in 1966 on a trip that gave rise to six articles entitled “A New Kind of War”, with her observations and reflections stemming from forays to the front lines and infirmaries for the wounded that she conducted in the south of the country. At the time of the trip, the war was twelve years old and political polarization around it had grown throughout the world. In this context, Gellhorn’s portrait of the infirmaries where the Vietnamese injured were treated, reveals the perplexity and resignation with which the population dealt with the violence of the conflict: “the old are pitiful in their bewilderment, the adults seem locked in an aloof resignation, the children’s ward is unbearable. No one protests or complains. We big overfed white people will never know what they feel” (Gellhorn apud Sheldon, 1999:285).

The US government and armed forces sought to legitimize the military incursion into Vietnam by claiming to be combating communist expansion, which would mean protecting the autonomy and liberty of the Vietnamese people, especially those in the south, as well as strengthening the domestic security of the US by containing the advance of the USSR’s worldwide zones of influence in the context of the Cold War. As one US Army pamphlet pointed out: “we know what our mission is: we are here to help save this valiant little country, and with it all of South-East Asia, from Communist aggression and oppression. In doing so, we will strengthen the security of the United States itself” (Gellhorn apud Sheldon, 1999:283).

Gellhorn adopted the notion that this was a *new kind of war* as a theme for her articles:

it should be plain to see that we’re in a new kind of war. And the name of this new game is much, much more than just ‘Kill VC’ (Vietcong) [...] to really and truly and finally win this war, we must help the Government of South Vietnam win hearts and minds of the people of South Vietnam (Gellhorn apud Sheldon, 1999:284).

In addition to killing the enemy, the military operation would have a special objective of winning hearts and minds and, in this way, combating Communist oppression and aggression. Warning people about the risks of communism meant, by extension, winning hearts and minds to the lifestyles and production associated with market economics and capitalism, which could not, however, be accomplished without the use of direct violence.

Concluding her series of articles, Gellhorn reflected on this strategy of legitimizing war’s violence, by arguing:

we are not maniacs and monsters; but our planes range the sky all day and all night and our artillery is lavish and we have much more deadly stuff to kill with [...] this is indeed a new kind of war [...] and we had better find a new way to fight it. Hearts and minds, after all, live in bodies” (Gellhorn apud Sheldon, 1999:288).

By emphasizing that the hearts and minds to be conquered also inhabited bodies, Gellhorn was pointing to the fact that these were being annihilated by the unequal balance of military power between the armed forces of the United States and a civil population that was unarmed or organized into poorly-equipped platoons and artillery groups with little military training⁶. She thus argued that the efforts of the US government and armed forces to justify and legitimize the war using the rhetoric of defending South Vietnam from Communist aggression and oppression produced an ambiguity. It helped foster the notion that the US was facing an ideological war important for its own national security and, therefore, a new kind of war. Yet it paved the way for it to be questioned.

Let us now turn to writer and critic Mary McCarthy’s trip to Vietnam in February 1967, at the invitation of the Women’s Union. McCarthy wrote a series of essays published in the *New York Review of Books*, among them: “Report from Vietnam I: the home program” (20/04/1967); “Report

⁶ Official figures record 58,214 members of the US armed forces killed in combat in Vietnam between 1956 and 1975 (National Archives, 2008). On the Vietnamese side, the data is not precise, but there is some consensus in estimating, for the same period, 2.5 million dead (Rummel, 1997).

from Vietnam II: the problems of success” (04/05/1967) and “Report from Vietnam III: intellectuals” (18/05/1967), which were later expanded upon and coalesced in the book *Vietnam*, also from 1967. In the same magazine, the author published “Hanoi—1968” (May 23, 1968), “Hanoi II” (June 6, 1968), “North Vietnam: the countryside” (June 20, 1968) and “North Vietnam: language” (July 11, 1968).

The author’s first account focuses on a description of how the dynamics of old Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City) did not seem strange to her, she readily associated them with images and lifestyles in US cities:

as we drove into downtown Saigon, through a traffic jam, I had the fresh shock of being in what looked like an American city, a very shoddy West Coast one, with a Chinatown and a slant-eyed Asiatic minority. Not only military vehicles of every description, but Chevrolets, Chryslers, Mercedes Benz, Volkswagens, Triumphs, and white men everywhere in sport shirts and drip-dry pants (McCarthy, 1967a: s/p).

Throughout her texts, McCarthy describes the various active fronts of the US war effort in a country that, in addition to military operations, also included a commitment of economic resources to promote the political stability of ruling groups of the Republic of Vietnam. These were made, primarily, through loans and agreements to finance Vietnamese imports of US equipment and products.

These imports both strengthened US industry and sought to change the lifestyles of the Vietnamese population, especially those related to eating habits, with the distribution of canned goods to stimulate the consumption of processed foods, and the distribution of seeds and fertilizers that required different forms of cultivation and soil preparation. According to an official of the then Joint United States Public Affairs Office (JUSPAO)⁷ interviewed by McCarthy, the primary objective of these initiatives was to make the US and Americans popular in the region, combined with a corresponding effort: “we’re trying to wean them away from the old barter economy and show them a market economy. [...] ‘We’re teaching them free enterprise’” (McCarthy, 1967a:s/p).

In her third article, McCarthy takes an openly critical stance on US military operations in Vietnam, emphasizing that they were not confronting an organized army, but a population group. She affirmed that it was necessary to acknowledge that it was a guerilla war, and that the US armed forces high command and intelligence agencies had to recognize that the combatants and non-combatants would be practically inseparable, and, therefore, there could be no bombings or fatalities that did not run the risk of indiscriminately hitting the population. In her words: “in the American view, no area bombing implies premeditation of the results that follow, while every grenade hurled by a Viet Cong is launched in conformance with a theory and therefore possesses will and consciousness” (McCarthy, 1967b:s/p).

McCarthy thus affirmed that the strategies of the US intelligence agencies and military command involved repeated efforts to dehumanize the Vietnamese combatants, treated and represented as a set of indistinct enemies, regardless of their age, gender or ideological position. As Gellhorn had also pointed out, the target of the war was communism and its objective was to win hearts and minds for the market economy.

In 1968, a year after McCarthy, Susan Sontag traveled to Hanoi, and published an article in *Esquire* magazine entitled “Trip to Hanoi. Notes on the enemy camp”, which was later expanded and published in a book entitled *Trip to Hanoi*, released in 1969. Sontag began to gain prominence in US intellectual and political life as a cultural critic and essayist, and her trip took place in a context in which the violence of the war had grown considerably⁸. The escalation and intensification of the

⁷ An entity that joined various intelligence and military command organizations to offer integrated support to the Republic of Vietnam’s information operations between 1965 and 1972. It provided guidance regarding a series of public issues, public diplomacy and psychological operations.

⁸ Between February and October 1968, two military operations left an enormous number of dead and injured: the US armed forces’ Operation Toan Thang (or Complete Victory) and the reaction by Vietnamese forces, the Tet Offensive. The intensification of the conflict, as well as the increase in international networks pressuring for an end to the war, led President Lyndon Johnson to order a decrease in bombings of North Vietnam in March 1968, and a complete cease-fire in the region in October of that year (Logevall, 2018).

conflict led antiwar movements to intensify dialogues and exchanges with a varied set of civil rights movements, and those critical of capitalism, in different parts of the world, as will be seen in the next section.

At the beginning of Sontag's article she noted that she was neither a journalist, nor a political activist (though she was a signatory to antiwar petitions). In fact, she would be a "stubbornly unspecialized writer [...] evolving radical political convictions and sense of moral dilemma at being a citizen of the American empire" (Sontag, 1968:1).

Putting into perspective the fact that she was a citizen of a country that acted imperialistically in the conflict, Sontag evaluates her role as a writer and engagement as such in antiwar debates, reflecting at length on the invitation that she had received to visit the country and on the insistence of her Vietnamese hosts, connected to the Women's Union and the Women's Union of Liberation, to emphasize the bonds of friendship between the two peoples. Of the three writers highlighted, Sontag spoke most explicitly about the contact she had with activists from the Women's Union and the Women's Union of Liberation, which allows observing an important strategy the organizations used to influence international and US domestic public opinion.

If US military and political forces were in Vietnam disputing hearts and minds, the Women's Union and Women's Union of Liberation made similar efforts, mobilizing intellectual and political actors to visit and travel through conflict zones. In both these cases, the hearts and minds to be won over were US and Vietnamese (in both the South and North), and, in a complementary way, other peoples around the world in a context characterized by Cold War polarization.

While the US side in the armed conflict insisted on emphasizing the different lifestyles and modes of political and economic organization between the US and North Vietnam, to assert the superiority of capitalism over communism, the Women's Union and Women's Union of Liberation made efforts to mobilize and attract North American intellectual and political actors who could intervene in the dispute. The visits to Vietnam, therefore, sought to reinforce the similarities of principles between the two peoples, notably regarding values like liberty and equality, whose political content and practical meaning were being openly disputed at the time by various civil rights struggles in the United States.

Sontag argued that because of Vietnam War, had she had reincorporated into her critical repertoire the words "capitalism" and "imperialism". In reading Sontag's texts, it is possible to observe that the intellectual exchanges and the observation of the dynamic in Hanoi, in the midst of the war, helped the writer rethink her vocabulary, incorporating ways of speaking and interpreting the social world, whose key effect is the destabilization of the associations between Marxism, Communism, and oppression; the basis upon which the US military operation sought to establish its legitimacy.

In this way, Sontag's writings and her intervention in the US public debate helped foment and strengthen a political grammar that enabled the incorporation to the debate of questions regarding peoples' rights to self-determination, a theme that was particularly important and dear to the objectives of the Women's Union and the Women's Union of Liberation.

Read as a whole, the writings of Gellhorn, McCarthy and Sontag demonstrate how some of the terms of the debate on the Vietnam War were being organized, especially circumscribing reflections on topics such as imperialism, the anti-communist struggle and the asymmetry of forces between the warring parties. By emphasizing that the Vietnam War, with its deaths, losses, and tragedies corresponded to an ideological and moral crusade against communism, the authors collaborated with the efforts of the Women's Union and the Women's Union of Liberation in the sense that they humanized the Vietnamese – and, by extension, communism, creating opportunities to legitimize it as a way of organizing politics, economy and society.

As the above evidence indicates, the sponsorship of trips for US intellectuals by the Women's Union and Women's Union of Liberation – in addition to enabling the free circulation of writers between the fronts, infirmaries and daily life in cities and villages affected by the war – helped to produce ideas, arguments and images that filled the cultural and political imaginary in the West about the Vietnam War.

By emphasizing the disproportion between US and Vietnamese forces, as well as the diffuse objectives and ideological dimension of a war for “hearts and minds”, the ways that Gellhorn, McCarthy and Sontag understood and narrated the conflict contributed to the promotion of successive associations between it and US imperialism, a point that also gained strength among various protest movements in the US, especially those based on race and gender.

Regarding the topics discussed here, it is possible to observe the convergence between these ways of talking about the war and the activism of US women, demonstrating the reflexive dimension of interactions between ideas and society, that is, the multiple relationships between ways of narrating and describing the social world and activism and political confrontations, influencing how different collective ideas and actions were produced, disputed and put into circulation within that context. It is especially important to note that this network helped to project US women as political and intellectual subjects with an important role in how public controversies over the war were developing in US newspapers and weekly magazines.

3. Gender and domesticity in the war

It was also at the invitation of the Women’s Union of Liberation and the Women’s Union that activists such as Dagmar Wilson⁹ and Mary Clarke¹⁰, of Women Strike for Peace, traveled to Vietnam to tour the fronts, infirmaries, cities, and villages affected by the war. Wilson and Clark also contacted Vietnamese women’s associations such as: the Women’s Committee for the Right to Live in Peace and Dignity; Vietnamese Women Demand Living Rights; and soldier’s mothers associations (Women Strike for Peace Records / The Swarthmore College Peace Collection).

Both the Women’s Union of Liberation and the Women’s Union brought together North and South Vietnamese women, with the latter gathering more activists from the North, since it was linked to the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV). Founded in 1935, the Women’s Union united a broader generational range of Communist militants, including those involved in military struggles and civil campaigns during the First Indochina War (1947-1954).

At the outbreak of the Vietnam War, both organizations had a considerable number of college educated women, especially lawyers, professors and journalists. In a context characterized by the organization of the socialist republic in the North, and by the impacts of the First Indochina War on the entire Vietnamese population, the associations between these professional occupations and privileged social origins need to be clarified. Without detailed data pertaining to the social origins and class conditions of these women, it is important to point out that their professional educations could be a result of CPV strategies to educate the ranks of political activists, or could even be related to the First Indochina War, which specifically mobilized young men, opening up spaces for young women in schools and universities.

Women Strike for Peace was a US organization predominately formed by middle-class housewives, especially white women whose political activity focused on disarmament, motherhood and peace (Evans, 2003). By connecting these three elements, the group claimed the rights of mothers to peaceful, secure environments for their children, whether they were young or of draft age. The group was formed within the context of various US movements opposing the nuclear arms race and the Vietnam War. It promoted different marches and protests across the US, in addition to being particularly active in its dedication to political lobbying and applying legal pressure on state and federal legislators, to end the war and defend the rights of mothers whose husbands or sons had died or been wounded in combat.

In addition to visits to Vietnamese war zones, the three organizations also promoted congresses in different parts of the globe, in actions that were especially concentrated during the second half of the 1960s and the early 1970s. In 1965, they organized the Jakarta Meeting, a four-day conference in the Indonesian capital to debate and report on the experiences and lifestyles that women from the two countries had in common. In 1968, three years after the Jakarta meeting, the three organizations promoted the Paris Conference of Concerned Women to End the War, bringing

⁹ Activist and founder of *Women Strike for Peace*.

¹⁰ Activist and coordinator for the East Coast of the United States of *Women Strike for Peace*.

together Australian, Canadian, British, Japanese, and German activists for three-days¹¹. In April 1971, a new meeting was organized, this time in Canada, to discuss the effects of the Vietnam War on the daily lives of women, whether directly impacted by the conflict, as was the general case with Vietnamese and US women, or not¹².

By that point, the conflict had already lasted for seventeen years, and the issue of how to build solidarity between women from different parts of the world was increasingly being discussed, while often sparking controversies and disputes, mainly relating to racial differences and national inequalities. Amid theoretical and political controversies, debates about the war and the daily lives of women helped to organize the way that US women's movements and activists in particular came to describe the oppression they experienced as citizens of the United States (Evans, 1980:170).

The three organizations' opposition to the war and their pacifist and anti-imperialist positions reflected the contingencies of the history and particularities of the various contexts, as well as the positioning of the actors (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 1993) in the contact networks established between them. The effort to produce international alliances in the context of the war challenged notions about equality and difference within the women's movements themselves, destabilizing universalist issues that could qualify the social position of women in society, and characterize their rights.

It was a challenge that, in the US case, was also marked by debates, polemics and political activities within the context of the social phenomenon of the emergence of the second wave of US feminism. The profusion of publications, publishers and activism organized around slogans like "sisterhood is powerful" and the "personal is political" and in movements such as, the Women's Liberation Movement, Redstockings of the Women's Liberation Movement and the National Organization for Women (NOW), helped to shift issues of race, class and nationality to the forefront of political and social discussions and mobilization.

These issues introduced additional impasses and dilemmas, because controversies between liberal, black, socialist, anti-imperialist, or radical feminists needed to be reconciled as they sought an alliance to confront the war. The questioning and rejection of the universality of the political identity "woman", based on various positions related to differences of race and national origin (an especially sensitive point during wartime), had the Women's Union, the Women's Union of Liberation and Women Strike for Peace come to emphasize the construction of another point of commonality that, surprisingly, mobilized another universalism associated with being female, namely, motherhood.

Motherhood, a polemic issue in feminist debates of the period in the United States, was the focus of countless debates, and particularly antagonized radical wings of the feminist movement in large US cities as well as movements of rural women. For example, Shulamith Firestone, in the article "The Jeanette Rankin Brigade: Woman Power?" (1968), written for *The New York Radical Women*, expressed the categorical opposition of US radical feminists to associations between motherhood and the women's movement, arguing that these women would not mobilize their struggles as spouses or mothers, giving rise to passive responses. In a speech given at a meeting of radical feminist groups in New York City on February 15, 1968, another prominent activist, Anne Koedt, defended the need to liberate women from domestic roles as the only way to overcome male domination (Koedt, 1968).

Obviously, it is not the only political identity capable of being constructed, but in the context of confronting the war, motherhood enabled the articulation of legal demands and political struggles that had their strongest functional arguments in peace and pacifism. The political identity of mother was able to produce effective and lasting alliances between white and non-white activists, from imperialist nations or the Third World. When analyzing the multiple bases of identity that characterized the social experiences of these activists, it is important to note that the association

¹¹ Two weeks after this conference, formal talks for a peace agreement began in Paris, only reaching a conclusion seven years later, in 1975. It is worth noting that, on the Vietnamese side, the Paris Peace Accords that commemorated the cease-fire was signed by the woman Nguyen Thi Binh, a member of the CPV and Minister of Foreign Relations of the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam.

¹² The conferences were held from April 1-6 in Vancouver and from April 7-12 in Toronto, Canada (Frazier, 2017:172).

between the war, domesticity and private life helped to guide the intervention strategies of these organizations in the international public debate about the Vietnam War. The experience of motherhood and the mother's political identity were mobilized as spaces of mutual recognition among activists, stabilizing the political bases for the construction of demands to be made to multilateral bodies or nation states¹³.

This strategy also indicates that the negotiation of the frontiers between public and private were very actively present in this context. The Women's Union, for example, was responsible for such far-reaching and impactful mobilizations as the "Three Responsibilities" Movement, launched on March 22, 1965, during the annual congress of the Women's Union. The movement's motto, which was coined by Ho Chi Minh, "good at housework and working for the state," indicates the imagined redrawing of gender roles, that is, women equally available for domestic life and for work in and for the state. Equivalating them, however, less than pointing to any equality of genders or of the relationship between them, indicates that fighting, producing and caring become interlinked parts of the single responsibility that women would have, before all else, with the nation (Chaguri, Paniz, 2019).

Other women's organizations also mobilized based on the identification as spouses or mothers, such as the US National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia and the nucleus that became known as the League of Wives, in addition to the Vietnamese Soldiers' Mothers Associations. The first was notable as a broad network mainly for advocacy and lobbying directed mostly at the US government that called for the localization and repatriation of the bodies of husbands killed in combat or who were prisoners of war; whereas the second built a network of national capillarity, comprised of various local community organizations, initially dedicated to assisting mothers who had lost sons in combat; the same objective as the Soldiers' Mothers Associations.

The face-to-face interactions between women from opposing sides of the conflict were not marked by ideological differences between communism and capitalism, unlike the relationships established by organizations and bodies associated with the official policy of the two conflicting parties. In the case of women, these social relationships were permeated by differences of nationality and race, which were equalized by means of the political identity of mother. Their activisms, struggles and ideas were marked by controversies between arenas of public confrontation, armed conflict, and domesticity, making gender, war and peace terms that came to qualify each other.

4. Conclusion

As seen, the war helped to catalyze and connect various forms of activism by women and variations of feminist, anti-colonialist, anti-imperialist and antiracist struggles, in a movement that can be seen as a "manifestation of structural contradictions, aggravated by conjunctural problems" (Galvão, 2011:112), in this case, the war. In other words, by participating in the war, women began to actively, and in an interconnected way, confront some of the central problems of their respective national societies.

The creation of consensus that could support a horizontal and inclusive alliance among women from opposite sides of the geopolitics of war, however, was only partial and triggered debates about colonialism, imperialism and racism that would mark the individual and collective experiences of the organizations, journalists and writers analyzed here. In the case of the latter, for example, even if the issue of motherhood had not been included in their reflections, they took part in this international movement: their ideas were marked by reflection about the meaning of their national affiliation at one pole of the conflict, which modified modes of talking about the war and about the political and social context they experienced.

Viewed together, political action and the production of ideas relating to it, destabilized notions of equality and difference, making them independent, though strained. Thus, when participating in war, different activists, writers, and journalists face, in various ways, the paradoxes involved not only

¹³ For the debate on mobilization and collective action, see Tilly (2010). For the debate on experience, see Scott (1998); Brah (2006).

in gender differences, but particularly in the creation of durable and egalitarian alliances among women.

As Joan Scott (1998b) points out, if disputing equality based on the affirmation of gender difference is a key indication that women only have a paradox to offer, the case analyzed here demonstrates that an international articulation of opposition to the war was constructed as the political identity of mother was universalized within international alliances of activists, promoting connections between motherhood, care giving and peace. By claiming the right to care for children and families in a peaceful environment, the demand of these women for pacifism as an international policy was also at issue.

Gender, war, and peace were articulated because they made common and shared dimensions of experience intelligible, and not exactly because they remitted the natural condition of the female. Analytically, this movement allows observing processes of differentiation and identification at the base of the constitution of collective action, the construction of political identities and the production of the ideas discussed here. They also point out that, despite efforts to universalize the category woman, feminism was markedly treated as policy and as a system of ideas, in controversies that make it contextual, in terms of its confrontation with structural issues.

In assessing the second wave of feminism, Nancy Fraser points out that it had emerged “from the anti-imperialist New Left, as a radical challenge to the pervasive androcentrism of state-led capitalist societies in the postwar era. Conceptualizing this phase, I shall identify the movement’s fundamental emancipatory promise with its expanded sense of injustice and its structural critique of society” (Fraser, 2009:35). Observing the social phenomenon of the emergence of this wave since the Vietnam War, it is possible to notice how the debates around imperialism and the opposition between capitalism and communism were converted into key supports for the formulation and contestation of notions of gender justice and women’s rights.

As Seyla Benhabib (2002) suggests, these disagreements constitute struggles for power, symbolization and signification through which it becomes possible to participate in the interpretation of culture. Reading culture as materiality, that is, as the specific space for the elaboration and organization of social life, the various ways in which US and Vietnamese (North and South) women participated in the war, shows the scope and limits of the international alliances among women of different nationalities and particularly among women whose experiences were marked by economic asymmetries and differences regarding their opportunities to make themselves seen and heard.

If, historically, women remained outside of time or event (Perrot, 2005:9), and restricted to talking about “moments that are not narrated, moments that are not noticed” (Souza, 2009:100), it has been indicated here that by participating in the Vietnam War, women integrated the public dispute over the war and as a result converted their ideas and activism into important marks in the context, producing an imagination about it (Sheldon, 1999).

Obviously, they are not the only social and political force to do so. It is possible to point out, for example, the activities of the Black Panther Party in denouncing what the movement considered an imperialist attack by the US government on another non-white people (Dumbrell, 2012:306). Continuing within the scope of the civil rights movement, the engagement of leaders such as Stokely Carmichael, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr.¹⁴ also helped to bring together the antiracist and anti-imperialist struggles, especially by the mid 1960s, demonstrating the breadth and variety of movements involved in calls for an end to the war¹⁵.

For the themes discussed here, however, the focus is on reading the war’s history as a history of the production of gender-based difference, which implies recognition of the existence of various ways of participating in a moment. Methodologically, it involves pointing out that the themes, categories and repertoires of collective action used to narrate and dispute the meaning of the war do

¹⁴ One of the landmarks of the reverend’s activities was the speech “Declaration of independence from the war in Vietnam” given on April 4, 1967 from the pulpit of Riverside Church, in Manhattan, New York.

¹⁵ The recruitment of black men for the Vietnam War was especially widespread during the Lyndon Johnson administration (1963-1969) and helped to foster this convergence. Increasingly, slogans like “Black Power” were being broadened, and came to include notions of a brotherhood between non-white peoples in resisting imperialist oppression and violence (Graham, 2003; Black, 2006).

not have growing, cumulative and stable meanings over time. To the contrary, these meanings depend on controversies and individual and collective experiences that are also composed of social processes (Botelho; Hoelz, 2018).

In the context of the international network of journalists, writers and activists analyzed here, it can be seen that, collectively, women were not ahead of or behind the time, making it possible to read the feminist explosion (Holanda, 2018) that marked the period as an expression of a political and cultural context in which women's activism, writing and ideas acted collectively on the ways in which power and domination are usually talked about, which, in the case analyzed here, meant the production of consensus and controversy around issues like gender, imperialism, war and peace.

5. References

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