

# Transnational Maternalism and the Vietnam War

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## Abstract

The Vietnam War (1961-1975) was a period of protest and unrest all over the world, particularly in the U.S. The War was occurring at the same time as second wave feminism, so it was quite common for feminist protests to address the Vietnam War. Maternalism was one type of feminism that was popular during this time. Maternalist feminism emphasizes the importance of the connection between women and children and relies on traditional gender roles; they argue that because women and children are so interconnected, women should be allowed into the public sphere so that they can make change that is best for children. This stance was very popular among women who protested the war, and there were several organizations based in this belief. This paper will look at three anti-war organizations that rely on maternalist feminism to make their cases: Women's Strike for Peace (WSP), the Vietnam Women's Union (VWU), and Women's Independent Democratic Federation (WIDF). Through focusing on these three organizations, it will be shown how these three organizations used a maternal feminist approach by emphasizing traditional gender roles to capture the attention of the public about the violence and brutalities of the war against women and children. It will be argued that the Vietnam War changed the meanings of concepts such as motherhood and femininity through anti-war activism, and that these concepts distort American's perception of war. Protests from the Vietnam War will be compared to modern day anti-war protests that utilized maternalism to demonstrate how maternalism is not an effective protest mechanism today.

**T**raditionally, women have been seen across many cultures as mothers who have nurturing, maternal personalities that gender roles insist upon. Women and children are also typically viewed as two interconnected beings, and historically have been hard to separate as individual entities. In other words, where women are, children must be, too. In

addition, women and children are often viewed as gentle, and as two helpless sects of people who must be taken care of<sup>1</sup>. Many people claim that when danger arises, women and children must be protected first. Where women are, the children must be too. Two helpless sects of people, who are gentle while mainstream Western feminism typically negates these notions, maternal

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<sup>1</sup> This is not the universal view of all women – often, white women are the ones who are predominantly seen as gentle and nurturing. Racist stereotypes about hypersexuality and strength are still thrust upon women of color, particularly Black women. Women

and mothers of different races, classes, sexual orientations, and religions, are still treated differently due to the persistence of racism, misogyny, classism, and homophobia. This is a critique of maternalism that I will touch on later in this essay.

feminism maintains that gender roles between men and women are biologically determined<sup>2</sup>. This type of feminism infers that, because women are supposedly predisposed to be caring, motherly, pacifist, and nurturing, women should be allowed into the public sphere and create change that is best for themselves and their children, because women know children best (Milner 2018). Maternalism emphasizes the importance of children broadly, using them to stress the importance of the causes that these maternalists take up.

Maternalism was a very visible stance taken by women activists during the Vietnam War. Organizations such as Women's Strike for Peace (WSP), the Vietnam Women's Union (VWU), and Women's Independent Democratic Federation (WIDF) were three very prominent maternalist anti-war groups. These antiwar organizations attempted to change U.S. foreign policy as well as global perceptions of the Vietnam War by bringing to light the devastation that rained upon children and the women in Vietnam. Nearly 20 years long, the War was incredibly brutal; Vietnamese villages were destroyed, people were tortured, murdered, raped, and terrorized by American soldiers. As a result, it was one of the, if not the, most protested war in history.

Outside of Vietnam, maternal feminism was also a fairly popular protest ideology among large groups transnationally. While it has lost some of its popularity, for multiple reasons, some modern-day protests still employ this ideology. In this paper, I will illustrate how the organizations WSP, VWU, and WIDF employed a maternal feminist approach by using the concepts of femininity and

motherhood to alert the public about the brutalities of the war against women and children in an attempt to discourage support for the war. Moreover, I will argue that the Vietnam War changed the meanings of concepts such as motherhood and femininity through anti-war activism, that these concepts affect the American public's perception of war and its damages, and that maternalism is not an effective protest mechanism today.

### **The Role of Maternalism in Anti-Vietnam War Activism**

It is critical to focus on WSP, VWU, and WIDF, because they demonstrate the usage of maternal feminism in different countries to promote similar messages about the Vietnam War. These organizations represent three players in the Vietnam War: Vietnam, the United States, and Australia. These groups worked together to show the world what the War was doing to the women and children of Vietnam. The Women's Strike for Peace was an American organization that leaned heavily into maternalist rhetoric. WSP represented Vietnamese women as mothers who wanted to protect their children, as victims of American violence, and they "promoted non-violence and an end to war, primarily to save Vietnamese children and women (in that order)" (Milner 2018). Prominent members of WSP were Diane Nash, Barbara Deming, and Dagmar Wilson (Frazier 2017). The Vietnam Women's Union was focused on showing the world how Vietnamese mothers had to continue with their lives amongst the devastation (42). In addition, they spread messages of women's rights under socialism, and propaganda about the War (143). The VWU, unlike

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<sup>2</sup> Biological determinism/essentialism is a theory that states that gender roles are biologically predetermined based on sex. It states that men and

women are inherently different in psychological and behavioral ways. (Chandler 2011) Biological determinism/essentialism is typically used to defend gender roles and the gender binary system.

WSP, shared Vietnamese mothers' stories of their roles in the war, and the lengths that they would go to for their children<sup>3</sup>. Prominent members included Le Thi Xuyen, Phan Thi An, and Nguyen Ngoc Dung (42). The third group I will discuss is the Women's Independent Democratic Federation. This group originated in Australia and has been described as "the largest and definitely one of the most influential international women's organizations [*sic*] of the post-1945 era" by WIDF scholar Francisca de Haan (Milner 2018). They organized meetings that specifically revolved around maternalist ideals, such as the 1955 World Congress of Mothers, the purpose of which was to connect women of all political and religious backgrounds through maternal narratives (Milner 2018). Using these methods, these organizations protested the Vietnam War. While these organizations used the same maternalist framework to push anti-war agendas, WSP, VWU, and WIDF were also different in several ways. The main difference between these organizations were the ways they depicted Vietnamese women. WSP was fond of portraying them as mourning victims of the U.S.'s terror. Furthermore, as individual members of WSP came to realize that women fighting back against the U.S. soldiers was reasonable and perhaps admirable, they continued to publicly express nonviolence<sup>4</sup>. The VWU portrayed Vietnamese women as mothers mourning the loss of their children, but also as mothers who fought back against the brutality they and their families experienced. It was in this way that these women sought equality with men. And in WIDF's public

expressions of support, they were very adamant about children and women as victims. Despite these differences, these organizations had many similarities within their activism. They worked together and attended each other's conferences. Members of WIDF and WSP travelled to Vietnam to aid women and children and hear their stories, and to see the violence firsthand. In reality, they did much more than attend conferences, and they achieved quite a lot during their time in Vietnam. For example, Mary Clarke, a member of WSP, established a fund that went towards a children's hospital in Northern Vietnam.

But questions still arise when examining these tactics and this type of feminism as activism: Why use maternalism at all? What did this so-called feminism do for the causes these groups were promoting? Maternalism's appeals to patriarchal norms and gender roles made it a familiar concept to men at the time. Turning such gendered notions on their heads and making it into something that should bring women into the public sphere was a way for women to create change. These groups utilized maternalism to harness the force of mothers from all over. The discourse that was used by WIDF "appealed to the universality of motherhood, and could unite women across race, class, political and national divisions" (Milner 2018). This was beneficial to the maternalist movement because it united mothers from different backgrounds and places in a common cause—protecting children. WIDF portrayed themselves (as well as other women) as "mothers concerned for the welfare of children" (Frazier 2017, 41). By positioning women as peaceful

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<sup>3</sup> In a poem entitled "My Son's Childhood", a mother in Vietnam mourns for her living child having to grow up during the Vietnam War, playing "with a bomb shelter", and she says that "The gun is close by, bullets ready/If I must shoot" (Quynh 1969).

<sup>4</sup> Barbara Deming of WSP realized that "for the Vietnamese, femininity did not exclude militancy", and this "troubled her because she recognized women's potential to act violently", but she continued to advocate for nonviolence, and nonviolent resistance (Frazier 2017, 22).

mothers, maternalism protects women from being attacked as masculine or “less than a woman,” – as many women in power are often dubbed. Portraying women as maternal and helpless ultimately helped safeguard them against “vilification” (26). Essentially, it was important for women antiwar activists to avoid being villainized in order for them to hold credibility in the eyes of the public.

### **Public Perceptions of Maternalist Groups and Consequences for Women Activists**

The public perception of these groups varied. Some of the American public viewed WIDF as a potential communist actor. A *New York Times* article from 1949 associates WIDF with the Soviet Union and Joseph Stalin, and while it does not mention any WIDF members directly, it connects it with members of the Congress of American Women (NYT 1949). Members of CAW who attended the meeting wished the Soviet Union a prosperous future, and the article ties WIDF with this comment, although they did not make it (1949). In an article about WIDF and the Cold War, Yulia Gradszkova<sup>5</sup> discusses how WIDF’s anti-imperialism front towards America led to accusations of WIDF being a “‘Communist front’ under the control of Moscow” (2019). Suspicions about WSP were not only around communism, though. In 1967, WSP protestors attempted to rally outside of the White House. These women first marched to the office of army General Lewis Hershey and were allowed by the police to march safely until they reached the White House. The police guarded the White House fence, and the protesters attempted to crawl

between their legs and push past the officers to picket the fence. However, this led to the arrival of more police holding clubs, and Dagmar Wilson, who spoke for WSP at the time, talked the protestors down from doing anything more that would get them arrested. The press, however, covered this event as bloody and brutal. A *New York Times* headline stated that “Women Fight Police Near White House”, when this was not, in fact, what happened (Swerdlow 1992, 168-169). The U.S. government was suspicious of the spokeswoman, Dagmar Wilson<sup>6</sup>, for similar reasons. As Wilson learned to sympathize with the Vietnamese women who violently opposed the War, she accidentally stated that upon seeing a U.S. plane bombing when she was in Vietnam, she “wanted to take up a gun and shoot back” (Frazier 2017, 31). This made the FBI suspicious of her, and even though she situated herself as a nonviolent mother wanting peace, they closely monitored her talks and declarations (32).

In some ways, maternalism acted as a shield to protect well-known members of these organizations from being vilified. Well-known women benefited from it because, while they were in the limelight, they were protected by their images as mothers and caretakers. Women who were not mothers but who were involved in these organizations did receive somewhat harsh treatment, such as Barbara Deming. Her lesbianism, lack of motherhood, and public disagreement with the U.S.’s policy and presence in Vietnam made her a target for congressmen. Congressman Louis Wyman attacked her as a treasonous individual and a

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<sup>5</sup> A history professor at Stockholm University in Sweden. She has written many pieces on feminism, the Soviet Union, and gender equality in Russia.

<sup>6</sup> Dagmar Wilson was the founder of Women’s Strike for Peace. She founded it in 1961, in response to tensions between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. Wilson wanted President Kennedy to do more in the

ways of ending nuclear testing and disarming the Soviet Union. WSP was in contact with the Soviet Women’s Committee in Russia, and they both wanted to stop “policies based in military might” and urge peace between the Soviets and Americans. She said about their organizations, “We have a common concern – the welfare of our children.” (Shuster 1962)

“so-called pacifist” (26-27). She was less protected from vilification because she was not a mother, as she was the only one targeted in this aggressive way (27). In other ways, these women were criticized for their use of maternalism. In a *New York Times* article from 1962, titled “Women’s Peace Group Uses Feminine Tactics:...”, the author points out that the Women’s Strike for Peace stresses “femininity rather than feminism” (Molli 1962), and in this way they did receive backlash for using maternalist tactics.

### **Legacy of Maternalism and Contemporary Maternalist Activism**

The use of maternalist tactics to protest the Vietnam War changed the way that maternalism is utilized now, and the War itself changed how mothers in the U.S. saw their own roles. It is significant that maternalism is still employed today, although in different ways, because these movements have the potential to perpetuate harmful views of women as subordinate. Additionally, although maternalism was meant to unite mothers from all over the world, no matter their differences, certain members of WSP found that their experiences and visits to Vietnam were shaped by their race and sexual orientation. For instance, most WSP members were able to travel to Vietnam and portray themselves as middle-class, heterosexual, white mothers, while both Diane Nash and Barbara Deming were unable to do so. Diane Nash was African-American, and Barbara Deming was a lesbian and had no children. Because maternalist movements were mostly made up of white, middle-class, straight mothers, this movement failed to protect the women of color and LGBTQ+

women that were involved in these organizations. This was one of the limitations of maternalism (Frazier 2017, 34). For members of WSP who had visited and observed firsthand the plights and lives of Vietnamese women during the war, their original thoughts on maternal instincts were challenged (143). In Vietnam, they saw mothers fight and use violence to protect their children and families. This challenge to traditional femininity was occurring at the same time that second wave feminism was at its peak. Women were beginning to find issue with the gender roles that they had been participating in for so long and began to acknowledge that mothers can be violent and aggressive in the names of their children (143).

Maternalism today largely reflects these shifts and nuances stemming from wartime visits noted above. Now, maternalism leans towards being more militant, as activists acknowledge that mothers can be violent and have embraced a sort of “maternal anger” (Abrams 2007, 869). A modern example is Cindy Sheehan and her organization Gold Star Families for Peace. Her eldest son died during the Iraq War, and in protest of this meaningless war, she “camped out in a ditch” across from President Bush’s ranch, declaring that she would not leave until he met with her (858). Her argument was that as a mother, she had more stake in the Iraq War than anyone running the war, and that her knowledge of the War stemmed from her son’s death in Iraq (859). She used terms like “suffering mother” to describe herself and invoked the word “matriotism”<sup>7</sup> (859). Sheehan’s tactics are a mix of traditional maternalism and modern maternalism, as matriotism is a very different concept from the maternalism used

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<sup>7</sup> Cindy Sheehan described matriotism as, essentially, someone who is a pacifist until there are human lives at stake, and once there are lives at stake, the matriots “fight their own battles, but take a dim view of

having to do so,” and “would seldom resort to violence to solve conflict!” She said, “Patriots hide behind the flag and eagerly send young people to die to fill their own pocketbooks.” (Sheehan 2006)

to protest the Vietnam War. While both modern movements and movements such as WSP called out the U.S. government as in the wrong, does the use of maternalism also make the war more palatable to the general public? If the war is framed as a mother's grief, instead of a soldier's pain and the pain of innocent citizens who suffered at the hands of these soldiers, it gives the public something to grasp onto that is, in some ways, easier to process. It is somehow easier to comprehend than the complex ways a soldier feels when they return from war. Perhaps, to the general public, a mother's grief of the loss of her son is regrettable, but justifiable. People say things along the lines of, 'it's sad that this soldier died, but it was for a good cause', which somewhat acknowledges the pain of the bereaved while also justifying the war that the soldier died in. But, if wars were framed in a soldier's pain after the war, or in the citizens who were living in the warzone and what happened to them, the public's reaction to war would be different. If the Vietnam War was seen, in the U.S., as a war with no purpose, that killed and tortured and ruined the lives of so many Vietnamese; a war in which Americans treated innocent people with ceaseless and unbelievable cruelty, the public may view the War in an entirely different light. In this way, maternalism shed a small amount of light on this view. Organizations did depict the war in this filter of a mother's love, but to do that, they had to also tell the public of the death and murder of children and family members of Vietnamese women by American soldiers. The view that the Vietnam War was without cause can be compared to other wars that also have been seen to have no purpose, such as when Cindy Sheehan argued that the war in Iraq had no direction. When maternalists bring these issues to light and they are out there for everyone to hear, it is up to the rest of the American public to pay

attention and to care. The work of maternalists only goes so far, and they need others outside of the movement to take up the cause and do more than just care. They need people to act upon those feelings.

### **Conclusion: Limitations of Maternalism in Contemporary Anti-War Activism**

Maternalism has many positives as an anti-war perspective, as well as some downsides. Firstly, maternalism protected certain women in anti-war maternalist organizations from being vilified and brought to light some of the catastrophes from the Vietnam War. The Vietnam Women's Union, Women's Strike for Peace, and Women's International Democratic Federation were all groups that utilized maternalism and applied it to their anti-war messages. Some groups depicted Vietnamese mothers as victims, others showed them as the warriors. Secondly, WSP and WIDF were suspected to be communist actors and were criticized by the American media for that, as well as for anti-American remarks. Thirdly, in getting their point across and framing war through the filter of maternal loss, though, they do sanitize wars for the public.

Aside from the achievements of maternalism during the Vietnam War, maternalism should not be viewed as a beneficial tool for organizations to use in anti-war movements because of the lens that maternalists filter war through. Maternalist activism was effective in providing women a place in the public sphere during the Vietnam War and alerted the American public that women in Vietnam were suffering from this War, but as a modern-day tactic, it should be replaced with a feminism that is not reliant on patriarchal, sexist gender norms and helps to bring light to the fact that wars are without legitimate purpose. The Vietnam War was without purpose, the Iraq War was without purpose,

unless purpose is counted in death and destruction. Ultimately, feminists should take issue with any anti-war movements that have the potential to legitimize senseless violence, especially by upholding the frailty and powerlessness of women.

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