

LETTER TO BILLY: ON WOMEN AND WARS

DEAR BILLY

I apologize you're getting my response this late; I recently sailed to the east and there was almost no time to read your notes. I get so excited to writing you about my adventures most especially when there is a new tale to tell. You seem all fascinated by your new area of interest. It reminded me of how you felt when miss Beatrice had told her version of what she heard about the Vietnam war in eighth grade; how it made us assume that women were always silent during the war and our careless jokes about them sitting at home to enjoy chocolate while their husbands were hunted both on and off the battle field. Well today, a young lad somewhere in Africa, made a similar joke and it forced me to think that many people out there, irrespective of where they are from, would die without appreciating the roles of women during a war. Bill have you ever wondered why Miss Beatrice would narrate a war and be so comfortable with the idea that no woman played any significant role during the Vietnam war ? Well since you raised the issue again, I decided to look up some reports on wars, and it's my pleasure to share some of my findings with you.

You will agree with me that most times we ask about wars as individuals, we will likely hear stories of the rise and fall of great nations and their leaders who were almost never women. When you Read about it, you'll likely be brainwashed to belief that patriotism and courage are virtues reserved only for leaders and their army. Even when you think about wars, is it out of place to say we are almost never conscious of the idea that women can be as active as their male counterpart during the war?

Even though most people would argue otherwise, a few would agree with me that the history or report of wars has always in its final analysis been on the one hand, the documentation of a nations ordeal or achievement from that nation's point of view, and on the other hand, the celebration of the male figures that were popular at the time of the achievement or ordeal. If it is not this, then reporters or historicists would hardly have anything to tell, since it is what is almost always what they report. Hence, reports on wars has always been heavily coloured by a deliberate yet inadmissible emphasis on male dominance; neglecting the significance of women role in a war and as such, reducing women to mere victims or casualties of the war.

A prominent tendency among historians and reporters of wars has resulted to a reverence for the power play on and of the battle field between nations at war, which has limited report on wars to only figures and calculus of loss either in material or human form and their overall effect on each nation's economy or the world economy at large. The effect of this is a neglect of other salient issues that may not have obvious significance on the current economy, but will definitely determine the strength of human development and consequently the nation's economy after the war. Among such issues, my letter which is a response to your view concerning women and wars tries to unravel how significant the woman is to the future of a nation at war. Thus, it asserts on the one hand, that women fight in wars as much as the men by focusing on the hurdles an average lady must overcome during the war and on the other hand, it will acknowledge how important a woman's contributions during the war are to sustenance and continuity of the state.

Wars are, as a matter of fact, not favourable to any nation. However, it is, in most cases, one of the popular ways for a nation to ward off foreign oppression or dominance. While I do not suggest that this is the only reason why nations decide to go to wars, I choose to argue that this is

the most reasonable reason why many nations fight. Although my point will hardly be uncriticised, there is a simple logic that in every case of war between two nations, one or both of these nation are trying to ward off or at least limit foreign oppression and if it is the case that either or both nations fight for this reason, then in all cases of war there is at least a nation fighting to avoid foreign oppression. With this in mind, I stand reasonably justified to assume that every nation fight a war because they have the hope of continuity, because they believe that the nation has a future, that it can succeed only through self-governance, even if it is bought with a heavy price. Hence, they need to limit to the barest minimum, foreign interference in the affairs of the state if they must succeed. In view of this goal, the nation must sound its autonomy to foreigners who would undermine the chances of its continuity.

It is rather surprising that any chance of continuity, in truth, does not depend on just policies or activities of leaders and their army but on the nation's entire population. What the leader and its army ensures is to take decisions that will provide a favourable environment in which the population can thrive and since war is one of such decisions, many persons believe that the continuity they hope for

can only be achieved if their nation win the war. Their point seems true but does it mean that any nation that loses the war becomes annihilated or will be deprived continuity? Of course not! This would have made sense with ancient kingdoms, where the victors appropriate both the towns, villages and people in the other state, but this is almost impossible because of the nature of modern states. At best the victors can only sell their policies and ensure that the other state buys them. Today a nation would still continue to exist even if it loses the war, though we might say it was unable to stop the foreign oppression. Nevertheless it does not mean that the other state were unaffected by the contest. Hence, wars are only won on papers, in reality everyone loses to the degree that it halts at the time, measures already put in place in view of the continuity of the nation. Yet war comes under the disguise of promising the same continuity it has halted. It is then logical to say that, wars are themselves a threat to continuity, not just in the sense of losing the fight as many would think, but for the fact that it limits if not stop, for the time, human development on which the nation's future is dependent. Thus, the amount of progress a state will make after war depends much on how its population were affected by it. But there is this common assumption to reduce the experience of

war to only the violent suffering and hardship that the people experience and then neglect the adaptive behaviours that individuals adopted to survive such hard times. My point is, how a population experience, perceive and react to a war situation would influence how they'll move on after it. From this, it is deducible that how much progress a state can make during and after the war may not be determined by what happens on the battle field. Well, it will be welcomed if one claims that the leaders and their army bears the greater burden, at least that is what reports and historicist makes us believe, nevertheless, to hold that other persons are not active during the war is superfluous since how the nation bounces back depends more on how the individuals perceived and react to the war situation. If this point is clear enough, then it wouldn't be out of place to assert that everyone is in one way or the other is active during the war. While I do not intend to debate which of the role is more significant, I do contend that the history and reports of war have always refused to cast its net beyond the roles of leaders and their army at the expense of others, especially the roles of women.

Before late nineteenth, twentieth and early twenty first century, it is quite unpopular for a woman to be a soldier; at most she

can be a paramedic. While I do not overlook the fact that, women are now active combatants in the military all over the world, there is still every tendency to conceive women to be backstage players or no player at all during the war. Little wonder why you and I had believed that women are meant to sit at home during the war. It's funny how much they can comfortably sit at home in a time of war. I mean it would have been fair if that expression is rephrased as, 'While many Men fight for the nation on the streets, most women fight for the nation at home'. A woman is expected to fight or be prepared to in order to protect her own self and children if she has without any proper training. My critics will quickly retort that this is almost impossible these days, given that the state will ensure that women and children are protected and not every woman is married to a soldier, so some still have their husbands around. Of course these are valid points, nonetheless I think it is very myopic to assume that what may be true in the first world countries is obtainable in developing countries. The history of wars in Africa suggest that every time there is war, which in most cases are civil wars, women and children are left at the mercy of fate, and the predominant attitude to life, is survival of the luckiest. Here women are exposed to not only rape and assault, but occasional fighting to

protect themselves and their family as most husbands would be appropriated in to the nation's army. Secondly, it will be unpardonable to reduce wars to only be between states, just to make the point that the state will protect its own citizens. My question then is, in a case of civil war, that is war between a government of a state and some factions in the same state, can such government ensure the protection of all parties? In fact, history suggests otherwise and most persons against the government are exposed to harmful treatment. Thus, it is not only an exaggeration to claim that women and children are often taken care of during the war, but unforgiveable to assume that the state would always play the role of securing the lives of individual families during the war when many cannot even do so when there is no war. Just like I have maintained earlier that, every war is fought in view of the hope of continuity, which is in itself dubious, because war is in fact a threat to those factors which gives essence to continuity like the progress of human development and the mentality of population due to the war experience, hence, one ought to be careful in making the claim that the government does more than any other group in ensuring the continuity of the state. For this reason it is pertinent to look beyond these popular figures.

Women are blessed with certain traditional roles, many of which the society assigned to them and a few which nature itself assigned to them. Certain behaviours especially those associated with protecting her family and children are more expressed than those the society assigned to them. The fact is, such behaviours are not peculiar to human female alone, hence, we can say, they are natural to every female animal on earth. More so, like other female, a woman's concern, abilities and behaviours especially as it concerns protecting her own to be fully at work when she perceives danger. During such time, the woman would not mind sacrificing every of her need for the safety of her family. The truth remains that, a nation who wins a war on the battle field and losses most of its adolescent and children has lost the war. I want to call to your mind, that it is not only the state that protects these young ones, and since they are most often not yet ready for combat, it is then logical that they get their first and protection from the family. If this is the case, permit me to ask, who is more likely to offer this first hand protection? I will live you to answer that. I do not want to believe that it is not just an oversight to neglect the roles of women during wars but what I do think is that, the women are often time neglected because they are scarcely found in a nation's top ranks.

Perhaps if a female was a leader of a nation, she would be acknowledged as a major player in war. Of course there are evidence to buttress this point in ancient history, as a few women have been mentioned. Nevertheless, my opinion is that, a woman or an individual need not be in power before their contributions during the war will be documented.

Some years back I had visited a village in Imo State, Nigeria and I was privileged to see as part of my tour, a local tunnel or passage dug by 6 Igbo women during the Nigerian civil war. I was told that the passage housed not less than thirty children for a month although the passage was later destroyed in the end. I was touched, and it occurred to me that a lot of sacrifices are being made by persons that are neither soldiers nor politicians or public influencers during a war, yet the world had chosen to remain unfair to these ones by not only recognizing them but even abandoning them after the war. I met one of the women, and she was not even bothered about being recognized, for her it was a good enough to be able to save two out of four of your children during such time. This is what she said to me, 'whenever they come into our villages we know some of us will be killed, some will be molested, some will be forcefully taken away and some will be raped, but we were

willing to do all of this for as long as they don't harm our kids'. This is just one story out a million that has been buried. Dear friend, women do not sit at home, eating chocolates like we thought, tell this to as many people you meet, tell them it's a big lie, history and reports on wars have and may forever be unfair to women if we do nothing about it.