

Schools, Mines, Sex and War

Often research is best approached through specific examples. In this chapter I will discuss four of the most notable examples of gender analysis published in the last decade. Three of them focus on everyday life in particular settings – a school, a workplace, a personal life – and one deals with gender change in a great historical transition. These studies come from four continents and deal with very different issues. Yet it is possible to see in them some of the common themes of gender research.

Case 1: The play of gender in school life

Everyone knows what a school is. One of the most difficult tasks in social research is to take a situation that everyone thinks they understand, and illuminate it in new ways. This is what the American ethnographer Barrie Thorne achieves in her subtly observed and highly readable book *Gender Play* (1993).

At the time Thorne started her work, children were not much discussed in gender research. When they were mentioned, it was usually assumed that they were being ‘socialized’ into gender roles, in a top-down transmission from the adult world. It was generally assumed that there are two sex roles, a male one and a female one, with boys and girls getting separately inducted into the norms and expectations of the appropriate one. This idea was based on a certain amount of research using paper-and-pencil questionnaires, but not on much actual observation of gender in children’s lives.

Thorne did that observation. Her book is based on fieldwork in two North American elementary (primary) schools. She spent eight months in one, three months in another, hanging about in classrooms, hallways and playgrounds, talking to everyone and watching the way the children interacted with each other and with their teachers in work and play.

Ethnography as a method sounds easy, but in practice is hard to do well. Part of the problem is the mass of information an observer can get from just a single day ‘in the field’. You need to know what you are looking for. But you also need to be open to new experiences and new information, able to see things that you did not expect to see.

As an observer Thorne was certainly interested in transmission from older people, in the ways children pick up the details of how to do gender. Her funniest (and perhaps also saddest) chapter is called ‘Lip Gloss and “Goin’ With”’, about how pre-adolescent children learn the techniques of teenage flirting and dating. She was also interested in the differences between the girls’ and the boys’ informal interactions – the different games they played, spaces they used, words they spoke, and so on.

But Thorne was able to see beyond the patterns described in conventional gender models. She became aware how much these models predisposed an observer to look for difference. She began to pay attention, not only to the moments in school life when the boys and girls separated, but also to the moments when they came together. She began to think of gender difference as *situational*, as created in some situations and ignored or overridden in others. Even in recess-time games, where the girls and boys were usually clustered in separate parts of the playground, they sometimes moved into mixed activities without any emphasis on difference. There were many ‘relaxed cross-sex interactions’ in the school’s daily routine. Clearly, the boys and girls were not permanently in separate spheres, nor permanently enacting opposite ‘sex roles’.

Recognizing this opened up a number of other issues. What were the situations where gender was emphasized or de-emphasized? Thorne noticed that, though teachers sometimes emphasized gender – for instance, setting up a classroom learning game with the girls competing against the boys – most teacher-controlled activities de-emphasized gender. This is true, for instance, of the commonest teaching technique in schools, the ‘talk-and-chalk’ method where the teacher at the front of the room demands the attention of all the pupils to an exposition of some lesson that they all have to learn. In this situation the basic division is between teacher and taught, not between groups of pupils; so girls and boys are in the same boat.

Next, how did the children establish gender difference when they did emphasize it? Thorne began to identify a kind of activity she called 'borderwork': 'When gender boundaries are activated, the loose aggregations "boys and girls" consolidates into "the boys" and "the girls" as separate and reified groups. In the process, categories of identity that on other occasions have minimal relevance for interaction become the basis of separate collectivities' (1993: 65).

There are different kinds of borderwork in a primary school. One of the most interesting is chasing, a kind of game that is sometimes very fluid and sometimes not. I remember a chasing game at my primary school, a rather intimidating game called 'cocky-laura', which was extremely rule-bound. One of the implicit rules was that only boys could play, because the girls were forbidden by the school to be in the part of the playground where a big gum-tree stood that was one of the bases. In the schools Thorne studied, boys and girls could play together, and often chased each other, playing 'girls-chase-the-boys' and 'boys-chase-the-girls'. Indeed the one game would often merge into the other, as the chased turned around and became the chasers. Thorne notes that often boys chased boys, or girls chased girls, but these patterns attracted little attention or discussion. However girls-chasing-boys/boys-chasing-girls often resulted in lively discussion and excitement. It was a situation in which

Gender terms blatantly override individual identities, especially in references to the other team ('Help, a girl's chasin' me'; 'C'mon Sarah, let's get that boy'; 'Tony, help save me from the girls'). Individuals may call for help from, or offer help to, others of their gender. And in acts of treason, they may grab someone from their team and turn them over to the other side. For example, in an elaborate chasing scene among a group of Ashton third-graders, Ryan grabbed Billy from behind, wrestling him to the ground. 'Hey girls, get 'im,' Ryan called. (1993: 69)

Thorne's observation of children might alert us to parallel processes among adults. Borderwork is constantly being done to mark gender boundaries, if not by chasing then by jokes, dress, forms of speech, etc. Gender difference is not something that simply exists; it is something that happens, and must be made to happen; something, also, that can be unmade, altered, made less important.

The games in which the children make gender happen do something more. When the girls chase the boys and the boys chase the girls, they seem to be acting equally, and in some respects they are – but not in all

respects. For a rough-and-tumble version of the chasing game is more common among the boys. Boys normally control more of the playground space than the girls do, more often invade girls' groups and disrupt the girls' activities than the girls disrupt theirs. That is to say, the boys more often make an aggressive move and a claim to power, in the limited sense that children can do this.

In the symbolic realm, too, the boys claim power. They treat girls as a source of contamination or pollution, for instance calling low-status boys 'girls' or pushing them next to the space occupied by girls. The girls do not treat the boys that way. Girls are more often defined as giving the imaginary disease called 'cooties', and low-status girls may get called 'cootie queens'. A version of cooties played in one of the schools is called 'girl stain'. All these may seem small matters. But as Thorne remarks, 'recoiling from physical proximity with another person and their belongings because they are perceived as contaminating is a powerful statement of social distance and claimed superiority' (1993: 75).

So there is an asymmetry in the situations of boys and girls, which is reflected in differences among the boys and among the girls. Some boys often interrupt the girls' games, other boys do not. Some boys have higher status, others have lower. Some of the girls move earlier than others into 'romance'. By fourth grade, homophobic insults – such as calling another boy a 'fag' – are becoming common among the boys, most of whom learn that this word is a way of expressing hostility before they know what its sexual meaning is. At the same time, however, physical contact among the boys is becoming less common – they are learning to fear, or be suspicious of, displays of affection. In short, the children are beginning to show something of the differentiation of gender patterns, and the gender and sexual hierarchies, that are familiar among adults.

There is much more in Thorne's fascinating book, including a humorous and insightful discussion of what it is like for an adult to do research among children. For me, the most important lesson her book teaches is about these American children's *agency* in learning gender. They are not passively 'socialized' into a sex role. They are, of course, learning things from the adult world around them: lessons about available identities, lessons about performance, and – regrettably – lessons about hatred. But they do this actively, and on their own terms. They find gender interesting and sometimes exciting. They move into and out of gender-based groupings. They sometimes shore up, and sometimes move across, gender boundaries. They even play with and against the gender dichotomy itself. Gender is important in their world, but it is important

as a human issue that they deal with, not as a fixed framework that reduces them to puppets.

Case 2: Manhood and the mines

In the late nineteenth century the fabulous wealth of the largest gold deposit in the world began to be exploited by the Dutch and British settler communities in South Africa. The Witwatersrand (Whitewater Ridge) gold deposits were immense. But the ore was low-grade, so huge volumes had to be processed. And the main deposits lay far below the high plateau of the Transvaal, so the mines had to go deep. The first wild gold rushes soon turned into an organized industry dominated by large companies, with a total workforce of hundreds of thousands.

Because the price of gold on the world market was fixed, the companies' profitability depended on keeping labour costs down. Thus the industry needed a large but low-paid workforce for demanding and dangerous conditions underground. To colonial entrepreneurs, the answer was obvious: indigenous men. So black African men, recruited from many parts of South Africa and even beyond, became the main labour force of the gold industry – and have remained so ever since.

Over a twenty-year period T. Dunbar Moodie worked with a series of partners to document the experience of men who made up this labour force, a key group in South Africa's history. Their story is told in his book *Going for Gold* (1994). Moodie studied the company archives and government records, directed participant-observation studies, interviewed miners, mine executives and women in the 'townships' where black workers lived. A key moment came when one of his collaborators, Vivienne Ndatshé, interviewed forty *retired* miners in their home country, Pondoland (near the south-eastern coast). Her interviews revealed aspects of the miners' experience which changed the picture of migrant labour profoundly.

Because the mines were large-scale industrial enterprises owned by European capital, it had been easy to think of the mineworkers as 'proletarians' on the model of European urban industrial workers. But the reality was different. The racial structure of the South African workforce – whites as managers, blacks providing the labour – might have kept labour costs down, but also created a barrier behind which the mineworkers could sustain cultures of their own, and exercise some informal control over their work. Most lived in all-male compounds near the mines, where they had to create their own social lives.

When the men signed on with recruiting agents – generally on contracts lasting four months to two years – and set off on the journey of hundreds of kilometres to the mines, they did not take families with them and did not intend to become city dwellers. This was not just because the wages were too low to support families in the cash economy of the cities. More importantly, the mineworkers mostly came from areas with a smallholder agricultural economy, such as Pondoland. They kept their links to that economy, and intended to return to it.

For most of them the point of earning wages at the mine was to subsidize rural households run by their families, or to accumulate resources that would allow them to establish new rural households on their return – buying cattle, financing marriages, etc. Being the wise and respected head of a self-sufficient homestead was the ideal of 'manhood' to which Mpondo migrant workers (alongside others) subscribed. The mine work was a means to this end.

This situation led to gender practices very different from those of the conventional European breadwinner/housewife couple. First, the men working at the mines and living in the compounds had to provide their own domestic labour, and if sexually active, find new sexual partners. Some went to women working in nearby towns. Others created sexual and domestic partnerships, known as 'mine marriages', between older and younger men in the compounds. In such an arrangement the young man did housework and provided sexual services in exchange for gifts, guidance, protection and money from the senior man. This was a well-established if discreet custom, which lasted for decades. For the individual partners it was likely to be temporary. In due course the younger man would move on; he might in turn acquire a 'mine wife' if he became a senior man in a compound. These relationships were not taken back to the homeland.

Back in the homeland, the rural homesteads had to keep functioning while many of their men were away at the mines. This too led to a significant adjustment, because the person left to run the homestead might well be a woman, such as the mineworker's wife. Now the older Mpondo men did not define manhood, *ubudoda*, in terms of warrior virtues, but in a very different way. As one ex-miner, Msana, put it:

'Ubudoda is to help people. If somebody's children don't have books or school fees or so, then you are going to help those children while the father cannot manage. Or if there is somebody who died, you go there and talk to people there. Or, if someone is poor – has no oxen – then you can take your own oxen and plow his fields. That is

ubudoda, one who helps other people.' [Moodie writes:] I . . . asked whether there was not also a sort of manhood displayed by strength in fighting. Msana replied at once: 'No, that is not manhood. Such a person is called a killer.' (1994: 38)

Manhood, in this cultural setting, principally meant competent and benevolent management of a rural homestead, and participation in its community. Since a woman could perform these tasks, almost all the older Mpondo men logically held the view that a woman could have *ubudoda*. They were not denying that in a patriarchal society men ultimately have control. But they emphasized a conception of partnership between women and men in the building of homesteads, in which women could and often did perform masculine functions and thus participated in manhood.

But these gender arrangements, brought into existence by specific historical circumstances, were open to change. As the twentieth century wore on, the homestead agricultural economy declined. The apartheid government's policies of resettlement disrupted communities and created huge pools of displaced labour. The gold mining industry also changed. The workers became increasingly unionized, the mine managements abandoned old forms of paternalism and sought new ways of negotiating with workers (though they continued to foment 'tribal' jealousies). In the 1970s the old wage rates were abandoned and miners' incomes began to climb. This made it possible to support an urban household, or a non-agricultural household in the countryside, and broke the economic symbiosis between homestead and mine.

In these changed circumstances the old migrant cultures were eroded, including their distinctive gender patterns. Younger Mpondo men no longer define 'manhood' in terms of presiding over a rural homestead. They simply equate it with the biological fact of maleness – which women cannot share. 'Thus,' remarks Moodie, 'for the present generation of Mpondo, maleness and femaleness have been dichotomized again.' The women with manhood have disappeared from the scene.

Proletarianization has arrived at last, and with it a gender ideology closer to the European pattern. Among the younger mineworkers – more unionized, more militant and much better paid than their fathers – masculinity is increasingly associated with toughness, physical dominance, and aggressiveness. This pattern of masculinity requires no reciprocity with women, who are, increasingly, left in the position of housewives dependent on a male wage earner.

There is much more in Moodie's complex and gripping work than can be summarized here: the labour process in the mines, life in the

compounds, episodes of violence and resistance. As with Thorne's *Gender Play*, I am struck by the evidence of people's active creation of gender patterns. But the story of the mines gives a stronger impression of the constraints under which this creation is done, the impact of economic and political forces. There is a clearer view of the consequences of different gender strategies – prosperity and poverty, dominance and dependence. Above all, Moodie gives us a sense of the complex but powerful processes of historical change that transform gender arrangements over time.

Case 3: Bending gender

In the early 1980s a new and devastating disease was identified, eventually named 'AIDS' (acquired immune deficiency syndrome). It was soon shown to be connected with a virus (human immunodeficiency virus, HIV) that killed humans indirectly, by destroying their immune systems' capacity to resist other diseases.

The global HIV/AIDS epidemic has called out a massive research response, from the biological studies which defined HIV – but have yet to produce a vaccine – to studies of the sexual practices in which infection is mainly transmitted. The commonest form of 'behavioural' research, as it is usually called in health studies, is survey research using questionnaires. But research of that kind, though it yields useful counts of episodes, gives limited understanding of the meanings that sexual encounters have for the partners, their place in the lives of the people involved.

It is precisely that kind of understanding that is crucial for AIDS prevention strategies – which, to be successful, must involve people in protecting themselves. Therefore some researchers have turned to more sensitive and open-ended research strategies. One of the most notable products of this approach is Gary Dowsett's *Practicing Desire* (1996). This Australian study uses a traditional sociological method, the oral life-history, to create a vivid and moving portrait of homosexual sex in the era of AIDS.

Dowsett's study is based on interviews with twenty men. This may seem like a small number. But good life-history research is remarkably complex, produces a tremendous volume of evidence and a lot of theoretical leads, and cannot be hurried. Dowsett's study took nine years to get from first interviews to final publication. Each of the twenty respondents gave a narrative of his life, talked in intimate detail about relationships and sexual practices, discussed the communities he lived in, his

jobs and workplaces, his relations with the wider world, and his connections with the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The evidence is remarkably rich, and raises important questions about gender (among other issues). It is so rich, indeed, that I will discuss just one of the participants here.

Huey Brown, better known as Harriet, was in his late thirties at the time of the interviews. He is a well-known figure in the homosexual networks of an urban working-class community, 'Nullangardie', which has been proletarian (in Moodie's sense) for generations. His father was a truck driver, his mother a housewife. He left school at fourteen, and went to work at the checkout of a local supermarket. He has held a succession of unskilled jobs, mostly in cafes or hotels; he currently works as a sandwich maker. He doesn't have much money or education and has no professional certificate in anything. But Harriet is a formidable AIDS educator, not only organizing and fund-raising for AIDS-related events, but also being an informal teacher of safe sex and an influential community mentor.

Harriet became involved in homosexual sex in adolescence, not as a result of any identity crisis or alignment with a 'gay community' (which hardly existed there at the time), simply by engaging in informal and pleasurable erotic encounters with other boys and with men. Dowsett points out that homosexuality does not necessarily exist as a well-defined 'opposite' to heterosexuality. Among the boys and men of Nullangardie there are many sexual encounters and sexual networks which never get named, yet make an important part of sexuality as it really is.

Harriet is an enthusiast for sex, has had a very large number of partners, is skilful in many sexual techniques, adopts different positions in different sexual encounters, and gets diverse (and perverse) responses from different partners. As Dowsett remarks, this kind of evidence – by no means confined to Harriet's case – undermines any doctrine that there is a single, standard pattern of male sexuality.

Like many other people, Harriet wanted stable relationships, and has had three. The first was with a jealous man who beat him severely; the third was with a pre-operative transsexual, which was hurtful in other ways. The second, with Jim, the love of Harriet's life, lasted nine years. 'It was a husband and wife team sort of thing. I looked after him and he looked after me.' Jim took the penetrative role in sex, 'He was that straight that he just didn't like a cock near his bum.' Jim worked in the building trade, they lived together, they baby-sat Jim's nieces and nephews, and some of Jim's family accepted the relationship quite well.

Still, Harriet was no conventional wife. And as Dowsett remarks, what are we to make of Jim?

It sounds like an ordinary suburban life, except that his partner is a drag queen with breast implants and a penchant for insertive anal intercourse with casual partners on the odd occasion! . . . Whatever Jim was or is, he certainly cannot be called 'gay,' and when Harriet says: 'He [Jim] was that straight!' he means a sexually conventional male, not a heterosexually identified one. (1996: 94)

Yet after nine years Jim left Harriet – for a sixteen-year-old girl. There are gender practices here, but not gender boxes – the reality keeps escaping from the orthodox categories.

In some ways the most spectacular escape from the box was becoming a drag queen. In his late teens Huey began to hang out in a cross-dressing scene and became Harriet, working as a 'show girl'. There is a local tradition of drag entertainment involving mime, lip-synch singing, stand-up comedy and striptease. Harriet learnt the techniques of being a 'dragon', was good enough to pass as a woman on occasion, and even had operations to get breast implants. He acquired the camp style of humour and self-presentation which was part of the local tradition. Harriet now uses these techniques, and the local celebrity they gave him, for AIDS fundraising. But he notes a generational change. The younger men, more 'gay' identified than 'camp', now like beefy male strippers better than the old-style drag shows.

Hotel work and drag shows do not pay well, and in a de-industrializing economy the economic prospects of unskilled workers are not good. In his late twenties Harriet tried another form of work, prostitution. He worked in drag, and evidently many of his customers presumed he was a woman. Some knew the score, or suspected, and for them his penis became part of the attraction. Harriet did some brothel work, but mostly worked independently on the street.

As Wendy Chapkis (1997) shows in a recent US/Dutch study, there are tremendous variations in the situations that sex workers face and in their level of control over the work. Harriet was right at one end of the spectrum, remaining firmly in control. He did not use narcotics, he offered only certain services, and he insisted on safe sex. He was skilful in sexual technique, and acquired loyal customers, some of whom stayed with him after he retired from the street – and after he took off the frocks. Even so, there was risk in street work, and a price to pay. Harriet learned to keep constantly aware of where the client's hands were. After several years and two arrests, he gave it up. Even so, his sexual reputation stayed with him, and on this account he was refused a job as an outreach worker with a local AIDS service organization.

Harriet's story (of which this is the barest outline) constantly calls into question the conventional categories of gender. It is not just that Harriet crosses gender boundaries. He certainly did that, with ingenuity and persistence, as a drag artist, surgical patient, wife, prostitute and activist. Yet Harriet is a man, not a transsexual male-becoming-female, and has mostly lived as a man. (In recognition of that, Dowsett writes, and I have followed his example, 'Harriet . . . he'.) The gender perplexity is also a question of Harriet's partners, customers, and social milieu. Every element in the story seems to be surging beyond the familiar categories.

Dowsett argues that the categories of gender analysis are seriously inadequate to understand what is going on here. He mentions critiques of gender theory for being 'heterosexist', preoccupied with heterosexual relations and unable to understand people who are not heterosexual. He suggests gender categories are often used in a mechanical and unrealistic way; in his research, gender identity does not determine sexual practice. Even when gender terms are used, in the context of homosexual sex they are transformed; an example is Harriet's comment on 'husband and wife'.

Sexual desire and practice thus seem to act like a powerful acid dissolving familiar categories:

But Harriet also teaches us that these gender categories are subject to deconstruction in sex itself: some like being penetrated by a fully frocked transsexual; some clients eventually do not need the drag at all; pleasure and sensation, fantasy and fixation, are the currency in a sexual economy where the sexed and gendered bodies rather than determining the sexual engagement *desire* to lend themselves to even further disintegration. (Dowsett 1996: 117)

Dowsett thus raises the question of the limits of gender analysis, and questions the concept of gender identity. It is clear that gender is *present* in most of the episodes of Harriet's life. But it is also clear that gender does not *fix* Harriet's (or his partners') sexual practices. Sometimes gender seems to provide the raw material for processing, rather than the finished product. Harriet's work as a drag artist, for instance, rested on gender categories and conventions familiar to his audiences; these conventions are parodied and jokingly reproduced in the performance. Nevertheless Harriet's work as a prostitute, with all its gender ambiguities, rested on a gendered economy in Nullangardie which put money in the pockets of his clients – all of them men. Equally their practice as

clients rested on a masculine culture which regarded men as entitled to sexual gratification.

One of the lessons of this research is that we cannot treat gender relations as a mechanical system. If human action is creative – as all three of these studies show – we are always moving into historical spaces that no one has occupied before. At the same time we do not create in a vacuum. We act in particular situations created by our own, and other people's, past actions. As shown by Harriet's complex sexual improvisations on materials provided by the gender order, we work on the past as we move into the future.

Case 4: Women, war and memory

One of the great experiments in gender equality was undertaken by the Soviet Union. The communist government established after the Russian revolutions of 1917, and the bitter civil war that followed, was formally committed to equal rights for women. A prominent feminist, Alexandra Kollontai, was minister for social welfare in the first Soviet government. A major investment was made in girls' and women's education, women's health services and childcare facilities. Women's participation in industry and other forms of technical employment rose to levels never matched in the capitalist 'West'. The regime claimed to have achieved equality between women and men, and open access for women to all spheres of social and public life.

At the end of the 1980s the system that held these ideals collapsed with stunning speed. In the countries that emerged from the former Soviet Union, different ideas about gender also emerged. Irina Novikova (2000: 119) notes how the attempt to create a new national identity for the post-Soviet regime in Latvia involved an appeal to surprisingly archaic models of gender:

This started with a 'return to the past', to the patriarchal traditions embedded in the paternalist and authoritarian model of the state that existed before Soviet annexation in 1939 . . . In this process, men were supposed to reorganize the state, while women/mothers were supposed to enshrine the 'umbilical' role of a cultural gatekeeper within the family/home/nation/state.

What happened in Latvia appears to have happened in most post-Soviet regimes, including Russia itself, and the former Yugoslavia

(Slapšak 2000). They are openly dominated by men, they marginalize women, and they weave together their nation-building with an aggressive masculinity that at times spills over into a warrior ideology. It is, on the face of it, a stunning historical reversal – from a system of gender equality to a militant, misogynist patriarchy. Why has this occurred?

Novikova, by profession a literary critic and historian, offers a fascinating answer in her recent essay 'Soviet and post-Soviet masculinities: after men's wars in women's memories'. This is an impressive example of the cultural analysis of gender, an approach that raises questions not about individual lives, or particular institutional settings, but about the broad cultural meanings of gender and the way those meanings frame individual experience.

Novikova argues that the reassertion of local patriarchies was fuelled by the desire to reject the Soviet experiment as a whole.

It is commonly believed that men were emasculated, made effeminate, by the official Soviet model of sex equality. It is popularly believed that men's historic identity was lost, and now has to be restored. Thus the critical response to the failure of the whole Soviet utopian project is reflected in a gender dynamic. In the arguments of post-Soviet nationalist and conservative state rebuilding, the essential falseness of the utopian project is proved by the fact that it attributed feminine features to men and masculine features to women, thus reversing the 'natural' sex roles. (2000: 119)

This reaction is reinforced by the precarious position of the new regimes. They are poor and dependent economies in a global capitalism dominated by the West. The celebration of a strong, competitive masculinity can be seen as a means of adjusting to this new, hostile and potentially overwhelming environment. Hence new (though also quite archaic) cults of military masculinity, and the rapid emergence of the myth of the hypermasculine Russian Mafia.

So far, the story seems straightforward; but it is more complicated than that. As Novikova also points out, the reassertion of masculine privilege could hardly have gone so well if the Soviet system had really been as egalitarian as it claimed, if women had really been in a position of equal power with men.

Stalin's regime was not just a brutal dictatorship, it was a dictatorship that specialized in egalitarian lies. Under the progressive facade of 'communism' lived a system of inequality, perhaps not as spectacular as the inequalities of capitalism but certainly as deeply entrenched. Part of

this was a structure of gender inequality. Many of the gains women made at the Revolution were rolled back in subsequent decades, for instance abortion rights. Women won a higher proportion of seats in Soviet parliaments than in almost any other part of the world – but the Soviet parliaments had no power. In the bodies that held real power (for instance the central executive of the communist party) women were a small minority. Women were present in the paid economy, certainly, but they also did most of the unpaid housework and childcare.

Yet, Novikova points out, women had an important symbolic place in Soviet Russian culture, which derived from earlier periods of Russian history. This was a place as *mother*, especially as mother to sons. The regime put a lot of energy into reconciling the needs of women as workers with their role as mothers. But it also drew on powerful cultural themes about maternity. Indeed there was a level at which woman-as-mother was symbolically identified with Russia itself, sending forth sons-as-soldiers to liberate the world. A gendered myth of war was created which grew to full flower in the Second World War and still existed when the regime tried to justify its military intervention in Afghanistan in the 1980s.

But women's actual experiences might be very different from the role in which women were cast by the regime. To explore this issue, Novikova turns to a little-discussed genre, women's war memoirs. She discusses the work of two writers. For lack of space I will skip over Elena Rzhevskaya (author of *Distant Rumble*, personally involved in one of the most dramatic moments of the Second World War, the search for Hitler in 1945), to concentrate on the more recent writer, Svetlana Alexievich.

Alexievich is the author of *Zinc Boys*, a controversial book about the 'unknown war' the Soviet regime fought and lost in Afghanistan – and also about Soviet motherhood. The title (which does not translate well) is an ironic allusion, on the one hand to the zinc coffins used by the Soviet army in this war, on the other to the Soviet imagery of 'steel' soldiers and workers in heroic narratives of earlier wars. The regime presented the Afghanistan war too as a crusade for peace and social justice. But it failed, despite superior technology and heavy casualties. Eventually the Soviet forces were thrown out of Afghanistan and the socialist government they supported collapsed. The ultimate victors were the militant misogynists of the Taliban movement who control the country now.

Alexievich interviewed veterans of the war in the 1980s, including women who had been there as military nurses. It is clear that the trauma created by this war was comparable to the failed American war in Vietnam, with similar levels of brutality, horror and doubt. Though the

Soviet regime was more successful at the time in controlling public opposition, it merely drove the trauma underground. *Zinc Boys* opened the wounds again, to the anger both of veterans and of non-participants who wanted to have the whole ghastly mess forgotten.

The book is an attempt at multiple autobiography, in which Alexievich as editor/author both uses and challenges the familiar cultural representation of the mother-son relationship in war. The writer's position is like that of the mother, but also unlike, especially confronting the emotional havoc among the Russian participants in this war. Instead of the welcoming and supportive national/maternal body, Alexievich and her readers confront body-memories of a different kind: male bodies, dead, torn apart, tortured, piled up and waiting for the zinc coffins – which were in short supply.

The memories of defeat and mental devastation, and the powerful image of the war cemetery with unmarked graves, shatters the traditional imagery of the heroic male soldier at war. But the symbolic position of women in relation to this war is also untenable. The code of the strong woman, the amazon, the fighter for a larger cause, is destroyed by women's real memories of harassment, humiliation, and sexual exploitation in the war zone – by the men of their own side. Women's activism – participation in the crusade – simply made them vulnerable to exploitation, tearing up romantic dreams of marriage and love.

Returning from the war, women found this experience impossible to reconcile with the cultural expectations for womanhood, with the model of a virtuous worker-wife. The only way to handle the contradiction was to erase the memory. Hence some of the outrage created by Alexievich's text, which contested this erasure.

The men returning from the war turned in another direction. For them, the failed war had been an experience of collective impotency. After the American defeat in Vietnam, as a gripping study by Susan Jeffords (1989) has shown, American films and novels put a lot of energy into the reassertion of men's potency and authority vis-à-vis a more available target: local women, and the fiction of sex equality. Novikova shows the parallel in the Soviet Union: 'Women are reminded that the masquerade is over, that equality was only a gift, and that female warriors are not to transgress the normal, biologically prescribed confines of their sex' (2000: 128).

Women's memoirs, Novikova argues, unveil the hidden gender dynamics beneath the facade of Soviet equality – and this helps us understand the post-Soviet shift away from the commitment to gender equality. Especially this helps us understand why it is often women themselves

who support this shift. Having been through these traumas they want 'only the right to forget their activism', and many become staunch proponents of the new patriarchy and the image of a powerful man. Thus we can gain an understanding of the – sometimes paradoxical – gender patterns in post-Soviet life by a careful attention to cultural history, to the ways traditional gender orders were both preserved and transformed in the Soviet era of 'sex equality'.

Other recent and notable studies might have been included in this chapter; more will be mentioned in later chapters. These four cases are, however, enough to show the diversity of gender dynamics, their complexity, and their power. In talking about 'gender' we are not talking about simple differences or fixed categories. We are talking about relationships, boundaries, practices, identities and images that are actively created in social processes, come into existence in specific historical circumstances, shape the lives of people in profound and often contradictory ways, and are subject to historical struggle and change. How to reconcile this complexity with the familiar dichotomy of male and female bodies will be the subject of the next chapter.