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Women and War: Opening Pandora's Box

Marie-Claire Patron

PREFACE

*In the words of Walt Disney in the film **Saving Mr Banks**: '[Like] George Banks, [the brave women authors of this book] will be honored, will be redeemed and will be saved in imagination. This is what story tellers do. We restore order with imagination, we instill hope again and again and again'.*

If we can instill hope in the hearts and minds of the women who have been deeply impacted by the traumas of WAR, then we can begin to envisage a brighter future. We will thus have achieved our objectives in **WOMEN AND WAR: Opening Pandora's Box**. Hope, the last remaining force from Pandora's Box is surely our ally.

Introduction

Tyrants and despots have always existed; ideologues with inflated egos, whose sense of worth and superiority and fanatical doctrines have catapulted their own nation along with countless others into global wars with disastrous consequences. Irrespective of the perceptions that one may have, based on the extensive records of war historians found in research archives, be they considered a 'good' or 'evil' war, it is hard to refute the fact that the legacies of war are tragic and devastating in anyone's language; this, in spite of the liberation of peoples who have been persecuted as a result of ethnocentrism, especially the Jews at the hands of Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany. The degree to which individuals have been impacted by war is unquantifiable and has been the subject of much discourse in erudite, political and social milieus globally. Yet, the lessons of war do not appear to have registered in the minds of the Western powers as they continue to debate their involvement in current wars whilst making future plans to rid the planet of dictators, terrorists and weapons of mass destruction. They grapple on a daily basis with the national conscience, making their moral quandary felt among the people, hoping to have their actions sanctioned.

For those who believe that we have seen the last of the world wars, think again! We are in fact, currently embroiled in a sinister and perennial war. Welcome to World War III, the social media war of the 21st century; an insidious, evil war that is being fought on unlikely

battle fronts across the globe, facilitated by the rapid development of modern technologies; a war that involves an unprecedented number of people, activist youth in particular who have been, disenfranchised, radicalized and indoctrinated, actively preoccupied in disseminating violent messages through mobile and social media. They may not fire a single bullet but they still remain responsible for the destruction of innumerable lives. This is a war that will endure as long as ideologues, despots and other pathological oppressors are allowed to run rampant. That they need to be stopped is not disputed here, but this war of attrition, in which the whole world is implicated, needs a considered and measured approach. Perhaps we need to heed the words of Pope Francis, *'The only way to win a war is not to engage in one!'* ("News in Italian. Pope Francis," 2015).

The challenge, of course, is to find diplomatic avenues to defuse the inflamed tensions in the war zones without triggering full-blown warfare. Whether one is implacably opposed to war or not, terrorism must be fought, this is undeniable, and nations have every right to defend their territories but how this is achieved will reveal whether the lessons of past wars have been inculcated in the minds of the ruling parties. World leaders need to take care that they are not creating a moral imperative to wage war without considering the consequences. They are often faced with political or ethical dilemmas; if they intervene they are vilified; if they stand back and do nothing, they are accused of apathy. Therefore the decision can never garner complete support from opposing factions of their government.

The magnitude of the literature pertaining to WWII and The Vietnam War precludes a thorough analysis of the issues involved in the context of our book, **Women and War: Opening Pandora's Box**. At the risk of rendering the chronological historical events trite and pedestrian, we ask for your patience and understanding, as this edition is not about wars per se, but on the fallout from wars and about the effects they have on people and in particular women and couples. The unsophisticated treatment of such significant events is thus, expressly meant to create awareness of the impacts of wars on individuals for the lay reader.

Wars are not universally all construed as 'evil', strangely as this might seem, although perpetual debate surrounds the legitimacy of the decisions to go to war in the first place. Few could deny the evils of Nazism and the tragedy of inhuman proportions that was the Holocaust. On the other side of the globe, the largely divisive sentiments that underpin socio-political attitudes on the Vietnam War for the social and psychological impacts they had on

the Veterans and by association, on their wives and families, is worthy of examination. The Vietnam War is pivotal to this book because of the many women who braved criticism, abuse and calumny from stakeholders who wish to protect their interests. In order to tell their story, shedding light on the deep dark secrets of their relationships, they reveal heart breaking accounts that have until now kept them in a perennial cycle of loneliness and despair, yet paradoxically tinged with love and devotion.

Gap in Research on Women and War

Whilst substantive research has been carried out on the impact of war on American and Australian male Veteran soldiers and to some extent on the American wives and South Vietnamese wives settled in the US post-Vietnam War, there is a dearth of inquiries focussing on the effects of war on Australian and South Vietnamese wives and daughters (Shoebridge, 2010). The American contingent of women has rightly earned its place in national narratives of the United States.

There is an overwhelming sense of gloom and doom when one reads the personal narratives of some of the authors in our book who embody the characteristic of ‘victimhood’. This is, in fact how most of the literature on the impacts of war on women is portrayed; women who never extricate themselves from the depths of their painful and damaged lives. Shoebridge’s (2007) research suggests that the women have not been considered as individuals; their roles are marginalized, they are either the wives, mothers, sisters or daughters of combatants. He claims quantitative and qualitative research is patriarchal, portraying women passively in relationships with men and as victims of the men. The women are stereotyped as having little or no agency, they are isolated. He advocates, as we, the editors do, that all of the women in this predicament be recognized as a hidden cost of war. We can offer, fortunately, accounts of some brave women who have succeeded in rising above adversity, emerging triumphant after the ordeal they have experienced in their lives. There is no guarantee that the therapeutic process of ethnographic writing will achieve the desired effects but one can but hope that the cathartic experience will liberate them and endow them with a spirit of optimism.

To a certain extent, Joy Damousi’s (2001) publication addresses a gap in literature – women’s experiences, identifying a scarcity of Australian social histories of war about their experiences, particularly concerning the Vietnam War. If one considers the cultural issues involved with the South Vietnamese women living in Australia who have told their stories, the task is even more challenging because like many other Asian cultures, perceptions of

shame and importance of face are hugely significant (Ting-Toomey, 2004; Ting & Patron, 2013b). Deeply personal feelings as well as discussions relating to their children are taboo, deemed culturally inappropriate and not discussed outside the family circle. In this book, there is an exception to this rule where discussions of an intimate nature have been disclosed as a result of the bicultural socialization into the western society, of the Vietnamese-American and Vietnamese-Australian women concerned.

The common denominator for all of these women is that they have endured real hardship during the absence of the loved soldier or subsequent to his death, particularly if the body has never been found or repatriated. More significantly, a growing issue concerns those women who faced and continue to tolerate unexpected adversity upon the return of Veterans to their family. Out of a sense of duty, pride, responsibility or shame, stories that would shock the world remain untold by so many women, some for fear of reprisal from surviving husbands or fathers, others from a misplaced sense of duty or family honor. And so the heinous crimes stay hidden as the narratives of these women remain locked in Pandora's Box of negative emotions, some unanticipated and others feared as the vicious cycles are repeated over and over again. The last of these emotions or troubles that Pandora managed to restrain before closing the box, or Jar as it was originally known, was the positive force of 'Hope'.

Pandora's Box

Many of the narratives in this edition are the epitome of the chaotic, unhinged and outraged emotions spouting forth from the confines of the minds of the troubled souls who entrusted us with their painful accounts. Just like Pandora's Box, they are occasionally constructed in a haphazard way that appears confusing, erratic and unstructured. Yet, like Pandora's Box, how do these women make any sense of the painful journeys that constitute reiterated nightmares that are their actual existence? For this reason, it is only apt that we include reflections on the Myth of Pandora's Box. These complex issues will be examined in Co-editor, **Dr Marie-Claire Patron's Chapter** that also includes a précised expose on WW11 and discussions on the impacts of wars.

Intergenerational impacts of war

The intergenerational impacts of war on families and on women in particular, are incontrovertible and multifaceted; be they the result of conspicuous, physical and mental atrocities at the hands of despotic and maniacal political leaders such as Hitler, or the covert,

insidious acts perpetrated behind closed doors by veterans who have been irremediably and psychologically damaged by their experience of war. The impacts are profound, recurrent and intergenerational. **Women and War: Opening Pandora's Box** is an anthology of narratives covering diverse perspectives on the ways that war has impacted on women. Each and every story deserves praise and gratitude for the brave women who have entrusted us with their innermost secrets and thoughts. Are all worthy of being respected and lauded for their courage and integrity.

The tragic consequences of countless wars waged on foreign shores by a great number of nations have also had an enormous impact on the returned Veterans themselves; soldiers who were conscripted either legitimately or through devious political means. Those brave, young recruits rarely gave any thought to Pandora's box of calamities that awaited them upon repatriation; alas with a disastrous rippling effect on unsuspecting family members, starting with their spouses.

If we examine the number of ways in which women have been affected by war, I believe most of us would be shocked to learn of the untold suffering some women have endured during and subsequent to the many wars our world has witnessed, simply because they refuse to disclose their very own private hell to the world. Their world is often defined by indignities and torment experienced at the hands of foreign aggressors, or worse, their significant other, where the psychological traumas continue to define their existence as they attempt to piece together the shattered fragments of their life, torn apart by wars. Why? One word! Fear! Quite simply, fear of revealing the deep, dark secrets of their personal torment, particularly when their spouse is still alive; fear of admitting to a failed marriage; fear of forfeiting the generous pensions that the government sanctions on their union with their Veteran; fear of starting again in their 40's and 50's; so many reasons for fear to maintain that vice grip on these defenceless women. Their reasons are varied but most 'victims' will ultimately confess to FEAR, one of the destructive forces unleashed in Pandora's Box.

Women (wives, daughters and mothers) of War Veterans, and in particular, in the Australian context, have been denied a voice as well as recognition that they are a genuine casualty of war. This demographic constitutes, quite ingenuously, unqualified collateral damage; the predominant portrayal of these women in literature is that of victim, though this stereotypical interpretation masks a more intricate picture. How many have emerged victorious and resilient after sharing their humiliating and traumatic tale with others through the powerful

therapeutic process of story-telling, through recorded interviews or written narratives? Shoebridge's (2010) research reveals an increasing number of women are becoming more resilient in this process. Those who cannot divulge their histories have not found peace and cannot heal. They have not found a remedy for coping with the tragic and traumatic events of their life.

Victims of War and Social Stigma

Many of the Veteran's wives carry the added burden of unjustified stigmatization as 'Victims' of the legacies of wars. Why stigma? If we examine the etymology of 'Victimhood', we can come to understand that being a victim is not arbitrarily a pejorative state. Should a person be belittled simply because she has failed to overcome adversity where others may have succeeded? If a victim maintains a passive stance and feels helpless in the face of misfortune or ill-treatment from various sources, why does society frequently cast aspersions on them? Is it possible for all victims to rise beyond their painful state to emerge victorious because of some innate resilience or stoicism? Clearly, the answer is no. For those who do, the outcome is life-changing, rewarding, liberating and glorious if the journey has been therapeutic and cathartic. Unfortunately, for those who are incapable of extricating themselves from the mire of pain, despair and shame, the damage becomes irreversible. They are too compromised to recover from an inglorious attack, a breach of trust in relationships, a loss of respect that causes one partner to decimate the self-esteem of the other, humiliating the individual until there is no escape, except perhaps for suicide.

The stereotype portraying these women as weak, defenceless or ostensibly responsible for their state if they choose to stay in toxic relationships is a polemic issue. The battleground of these unwitting victims of war, combatants engaged in a secret, private conflict, is the family home, where the prevalent mental condition, Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD thereafter), rules their existence. The intergenerational impact of PTSD on relationships with family members is indisputable if we understand that as the veterans suffering from this syndrome or other trauma-related disorders bring their problems home, the ramifications on the rest of the family, particularly the wives, begin to manifest quite early and generally haunt them for the duration of the relationship (Brown, 1984; Price, 2014). Research shows that this has a flow on effect on subsequent generations (See for example Castelloe, 2012; O'Brien, 2004; Yehuda, 2002) as more young people are diagnosed with PTSD than before. Whether the

condition is genetic or learned from our environment, the current review of literature suggests that it can be *'taught'* to children (O'Brien, 2004).

Research that has been carried out on the individuals concerned have received a great deal of attention in the literature over the past few decades from various scientific lenses, except perhaps from a caring science approach (Isovaara, Arman, & Rehnsfeldt, 2006). Inquiries have largely focused on the Veterans and less on their families, predominantly documenting the effects of war, combat related events and especially Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. The physical symptoms of PTSD are characterized by heart conditions, headaches, gastric and digestive issues and abnormal fatigue, whereas nightmares, depression, anxiety, concentration disturbance, aggression and anger, shame and guilt have been identified as the overriding psychosocial problems (Isovaara et al., 2006; Kozaric-Kovacic, Heroigonia, & Grubisic, 2000; Larsson, Michel, & Lundin, 2000; Wild, 2003). The focus of our book however, is the impact of war, not on the brave soldiers who have returned but on the women who form part of the silent, secret society.

As a result of the distress the women experience in general, it is this group who is also often diagnosed with Secondary Traumatization (ST), akin to PTSD itself (Greene, Lahav, Bronstein, & Solomon, 2014). Secondary Traumatization is the phenomenon describing the impact of psychological symptoms of trauma sufferers on those who are indirectly exposed to the trauma event; who in turn develop psychological distress similarly to those experienced by the direct survivor (Greene et al., 2014). It is not surprising that such an ambience can also give rise to Post Traumatic Relationship Syndrome (PTRS).

In light of recent findings on the above psychological conditions, why is social stigma so prevalent in most societies today? Stigmatization is certainly not restricted to female victimhood from the war. The tragic consequence of this destructive view is that those who are affected will not seek help or discuss the issue with others. There is an erroneous assumption attached to this stigmatization – that the individuals concerned are too weak to defend themselves or that they have somehow attracted the problem or worse that there is something inherently wrong with them. What they need to understand is that there is something *'wrong'* with the perpetrators instead. Yet, in the case of unwitting *'victims'* of wars, the lack of empathy is disturbing.

(Crandall, 2000) suggests that stigmatizers are not oblivious to the effects of rejection, not unaware of the pain of exclusion. In the process of withdrawing from those they stigmatize,

they believe that the rejection, avoidance, and inferior treatment they employ are judicious, appropriate and fair, in a word, 'justified'. They adopt the moral high ground for their rejection, based on ethical, legal, natural and logical bases. With what Crandall calls 'justification ideologies', stigmatizers feel they have the right to treat people as second-class citizens, practising exclusion with a clear conscience.

Breakdown of chapters

The Vietnam War takes center stage in this book, given the number of narratives associated with this war. Notwithstanding, interspersed among the stories presented here, several chapters recounting the experiences of women who struggled to survive during and post-WWII offer an alternate perspective; another window on an existing evil. Whilst recurring leitmotifs define the Vietnam contingent, others differ significantly in their composition and circumstance; yet, the overarching theme of pain, struggle and suffering is ubiquitous. All bear a remarkable resemblance in their indignities, pain and despair.

First and foremost, this book is about women who faced and continue to endure unexpected adversity upon the return of the Vietnam War Veteran to his family. Co-editor, Mrs. Roni Wildeboer presents a poignant chapter on the Secret Society of Vietnam War Veterans' Wives. This chapter sets the scene for our anthology of narratives from the Vietnam War. Out of a sense of duty, pride or shame, as these women shield themselves behind their secret society, scandalous crimes are reported to be committed by their partners with impunity and their torturous lives remain locked away in their secret sanctum. Fortunately, these women are not all 'victims' as they are traditionally portrayed in historical records. However, some, regrettably, do not succeed in extricating themselves from the mire, to emerge in a brand new light, freed from the yoke they have carried for decades. All the more praise to those who have carried such burdens for years, and yet braved the ire and criticism from various circles to tell their story. Their sacrifice in sharing with the world their tragic tales will benefit so many who are simply incapable of divulging their painful secrets.

Of fundamental importance, a chapter on Posttraumatic Relationship Syndrome (PTRS) is highlighted in this book where Co-editor, Prof. Ami Rokach, who is a clinical psychologist, academician and prolific researcher, examines the sociopsychological predictors, the potential causes and the coping strategies for dealing with this condition. In brief,

Post Traumatic Relationship Syndrome is an anxiety disorder that occurs following physical, sexual or severe emotional abuse in the context of an emotionally intimate relationship. It is a state of

psychological crisis that exceeds the ability of an individual's psychic structure to handle it (Rokach, 2015).

An equally significant feature of this edition is the psychological commentary that Prof. Rokach, a clinical psychologist, has provided at the end of each of the ethnographic chapters. The intrinsic purpose of these analyses is to assist the reader in deciphering the complex and traumatic episodes that have been recounted by the authors, particularly as a Pandora's Box has been opened up, unleashing many demons. As we have allowed the erratic and arbitrary tide of emotions to flow unhindered, as long as interpretation was not compromised, Prof. Rokach's comments unpack the underlying issues that have been presented in the chapters.

This volume features the narratives pertaining to the women and children whose lives have been irrevocably transformed by the effects of Dioxin, Agent Orange, or the 'Mist' that was sprayed indiscriminately over the villages and towns of South Vietnam. The tragic consequences are a legacy of American involvement in this unfortunate war that has had diabolical impacts intergenerationally over countless individuals, including some of our authors.

Further afield, we document diverse stories emanating from the other side of the globe. The stories emerging from WW11 are just as poignant and tragic, as they reveal the ugly side of human nature in more dramatic ways. We chronicle, from Europe, the narratives of courageous women and their families who narrowly escaped the destiny of the concentration camps of Hitler's Germany. In a review of literature, I document selected stories of heroines of the French Résistance. In another chapter, I recount the story of a spirited Sicilian/Tunisian/French mother of 8, whose life, impacted by WW11 and the Independence of Tunisia, takes on twisting turns before the family can settle down in France. The trials and tribulation of their hazardous journey and the challenges of settlement in an insular society show enormous courage and determination. The dichotomous impacts on her children are worthy of reporting. A story of flight from persecution and religious bigotry from Iran has earned its place in this edition, recounting how many women have endured intolerable hardships that have continued to impact upon their children and grandchildren. As families headed to foreign shores in cultures diametrically opposed to their own, some refugees attempted to find a better life in Pakistan, ultimately settling in Australia.

We include a special report from medical academics and physicians on the ethical dilemmas female doctors faced during the Holocaust. This chapter is a synthesis of academic and

ethnographic writing that provides a fascinating collaborative approach, headed by Prof. Michelle McClean, also a prolific researcher in Australia. We learn to appreciate the sacrifices made by an Afro-Mauritian woman, who defied adversity at every turn, especially amidst racist societal trends of the times after WW11 in Mauritius, to assume her position by the side of a white man. Faithful to the end, this lady's resolve to love and care for a physically and psychologically tortured war Veteran is admirable to say the least. PTSD had not yet been recognized.

A gut-wrenching story of abandonment, dislocation and loneliness by an orphan of the Vietnam War will leave our readers in awe when they read of the courage, resilience and determination of a young girl, who, not only survived the horrific loss of her family, but emerged triumphant from the ordeal of an abusive foster home. How she succeeded in forming and nurturing her family when entrenched in an abusive relationship as an adult is beyond belief, but her sensitive and poignant narrative will touch all who read this chapter.

Duty of Care

As a caveat, we, the editors of this book, Roni Wildeboer, Ami Rokach and I, Marie-Claire Patron, have an obligation to provide a duty of care for our authors who may experience Secondary Trauma as they delve into the deep and dark secrets that have defined their existence for a great number of years. Whilst the positive outcomes of baring one's soul are irrefutably therapeutic as documented in literature, one cannot naively believe that the process will leave individuals unscathed. We cannot negate the potentially damaging consequences of this action. For this reason, we have recommended that all contributing authors write their stories under the guidance of a counsellor or therapist who can monitor their psychological reactions as they progress along their journey. These women have all voluntarily offered to share their stories with the world; none were coerced into doing so. The health professionals they consulted have thus helped to allay their fears as they divulged atrocities that can emerge as they progress through their stories.

Some of these women were diagnosed with Secondary Traumatic Stress or severe depression well before the start of this journey. In the case of Vietnam Veterans in particular, many women naturally fear that the living veteran, husband, partner, father, may retaliate as a result of the revelations. Alas, many have abandoned the journey and some could not begin. We naturally respect this and hope that should they read the narratives of women who have contributed, that they will find solace in the knowledge that we can relate to their pain. They

could even live vicariously through the eerily similar accounts being revealed and recognize that they are not alone. The recurring theme of torment that has been revealed cannot be ignored. It is imperative that societies, governments and the public listen to their stories and take heed of the challenges the women face on a daily basis. Many women refrain from revealing deep dark secrets of their own personal traumas yet bring themselves to speak of others who have experienced horrific episodes during their relationships. This appears to be a recurrent coping strategy as they find comfort in speaking about the unspeakable if they do not confess to the acts perpetrated on them. It is after all, a little easier to allow the reader to read between the lines so that they can maintain a degree of integrity and self-preservation.

Conclusion

Is there hope for the women who will ultimately die without ever disclosing their stories? Clearly not for this group unfortunately, as their narratives will remain untold, forever trapped in their house of horrors. For those courageous enough to share their stories, to unleash their demons, there is HOPE that the exercise will have been therapeutic, cathartic, liberating and life-changing. One thing is for certain, it is time that these stories were given the attention they deserve because the diverse roles these women have played will serve to raise awareness of a significant issue that has been troubling many members of our communities around the world. Time to appear in the limelight! The *raison d'être* of this book is, after all, to sensitize the sceptics of the plight of so many women, intimately associated with war because little attention has been paid to these silent casualties of war. Raising awareness of their precarious existence and giving them a voice and a place in historical records are our chief objectives as Editors.

Our edition represents and honors all those who have experienced the impacts of war in any measure, first hand or intergenerationally, or through the testimony of loved ones. Some of the chapters are short yet articulate; they speak volumes through the unspoken traumas that have been unleashed; some chapters are long and eloquent, testifying to the deluge of emotions that flow unbridled once the lid of Pandora's Box has been pried open. Some of these women are wives and children of Veterans; some have fled the horrors of war, religious persecution and terror with their families, witnessing what no child should ever lay eyes on; amongst the children and siblings, some have lived first hand, traumatizing episodes that have left an indelible mark on their psyche; some have suffered untold pain and depression through severe illnesses inherited from their parents.

We thank each and every one of them; we commend their courage and we hope to have served them well. Pseudonyms have been employed in this book in some instances, to ensure that the safety and psychological well-being of the courageous women and their families are not compromised, for their contribution to research is immeasurable. The reward is recognition for the role they have played in these wars and their aftermath. We also thank the counsellors and psychologists who have played a fundamental role in this process also, protecting the mental health of their patients as they facilitate the task of revealing intimate details of traumatized lives.

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