Embedded within the social systems of patriarchy, domination and power, the institution of motherhood is a political concept. As Orleck states, “Motherhood has been politicized in multiple ways, both as a means to control women—through state regulation, medical intervention, and brutal military assault—and as a means by which women have sought to regain control over their lives and the lives of their children.”

The literature and debates on the notion of Motherhood are embellished liberally with the theme of “good mother/hood”—the social construction of who or what a good mother is and the significant role played by the good mother in shaping the national identity and consciousness of the future generations. According to Orleck, “Notions of ‘good motherhood’—underscored by popular images of maternal devotion and self-sacrifice—serve to regulate not only who becomes a mother but what it means to be a mother in a political milieu. The institution of motherhood...regulates acceptable behaviour, restricts expression and designates appropriate spaces for action.”

The idea of a ‘good mother’ especially gains prominence in the context of a conflict, where their role as the preserver and an agency of cultural values and traditions, comes to the fore. A good mother is valourized for raising future soldiers, who can be sacrificed at the altar of the nation. She is idealized as the guardian of moral authority and is expected to bear the responsibility of the nation—as a protector and nurturer—as she would do for her children.

Orleck states that “…for many women in cultures around the world, motherhood is a powerful political identity around which they have galvanized broad-based and

2 Ibid p.5
influential grassroots movements for social change.” 3 Women are also known to have used their identity as mothers, strategically, to put forth their demands and make their voices heard. This was done not only to increase their credibility in the eyes of the people but also to legitimize their protests.

Perspectives on Motherhood

Motherhood has been defined in multiple ways by theorists across various disciplines. For example, psychoanalysts tend to view motherhood through the lens of infant-mother relations (Winnicott, Klein) while sociologists generally situate motherhood within the purview of family and kinship ties (Patel). There are also other strands of perspectives like those of Sara Ruddick, a philosopher, who believes that a distinct kind of maternal thinking emerges from maternal practices (nurturing, caring etc) and the ethic of care that allows mothers to engage in political action in the public sphere. The following is a brief overview of some of these perspectives—

Psychoanalysis and Motherhood: Several theories within psychoanalysis have framed the mother as a central figure in the growth and development of the child. Sigmund Freud described the mother as the child’s primary love object and the parent who was most responsible for the child’s optimal development.4 Melanie Klein established a school of ‘object relations’ during the 1920s, which believed that the mother, as the primary nurturer was the most significant ‘object’ in a child’s life.5 Expanding on Melanie Klein’s theorization, D.W. Winnicott, viewed motherhood through the lens of infant-mother relations and introduced the notion of a good enough mother. His theory placed immense responsibility on the role of the mother in nurturing the creativity and growth of the child. According to his theory, if the mother is unable to provide a nurturing environment to her child, the baby’s creative ability to be itself is distorted and a false self, emerges. Elaborating on the failure of maternal provision, he cites the example of a depressed mother, who instead of responding to the infant’s needs, demands a response to her own needs, thus forcing compliance and adaptation

3 Ibid.pg.7
5 Ibid
from her baby. The notion of a good enough mother is particularly relevant to the institution of motherhood as it has a bearing on the social construction of good mother/motherhood in the prevalent discourse on nationalist identity.

Sociology and Motherhood: Sociologists have viewed motherhood from within the framework of family, reproduction and kinship relations. While some theorists such as Alice Rossi advocated that women were biologically predisposed to mothering, others like Dorothy Dinnerstein, believed that motherhood being a social practice, could be altered and the mothering experience was not limited to women alone. Nancy Chodorow, a psychoanalyst sociologist believed that division of labour which “allocated primary infant care to women at home, while men were in the workforce in more highly valued occupations” was the root of sexual inequality in society. Sara Ruddick believes that mothering as an experience is equally applicable for both men and women. Elaborating on it further, she states, “...a mother is a person who takes on responsibility for children’s lives and for whom providing child care is a significant part of her or his working life. I mean “her or his.” Although most mothers have been and are women, mothering is potentially work for men and women.”

Maternal Thinking and Political Motherhood: Sara Ruddick, a professor of philosophy and feminist studies, believes that a distinct maternal thinking borne out of maternal practices is at the core of political activism, for many women across the globe. According to Ruddick, “Maternal practice begins in response to the reality of a biological child in a particular social world. To be a “mother” is to take upon oneself the responsibility of child care, making its work a regular and substantial part of one’s working life.” Ruddick is of the opinion that maternal practices that include preservative love, nurturance and training are central to caring labour. She defines the concept of Political Motherhood as a transformation of values associated with maternal practices (protectiveness, non-violence, treasuring individual life) to political

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8 Ibid pg.8
action. According to Ruddick, maternal politics can be of various types. First, the constituency of maternal politics is not limited to women alone, but includes all individuals who have had the experience of mothering. Thus, these individuals believe that by organizing movements for social action (ban on sale of guns, against alcoholism, drug abuse etc), “they are extending ways of thinking and acting that originated in responsibility, care and love for children.” Secondly, there are some protests and projects that enact a “politics of attachment” appropriate but not limited to mothers (such as carrying symbolic tokens of attachment to register their protest). Thirdly, “there is also a narrower meaning of “maternal politics” in which women present themselves as “mothers”. While men may support these “mothers” in various ways, this version of maternal politics relies on its culture’s ideology of female mothering…they deploy a maternal identity and celebrate maternal relationships, exploiting the symbols of motherhood evocative in their particular culture. They may create groups that are explicitly maternal by name: Mothers Against Drunken Driving, Argentinian Madres etc.” Fourthly, participation in “women’s movements that include, but do not limit themselves to, maternal rhetoric and identity.” For example, Women’s Strike for peace, Women in Black etc.

Maternal politics can often transcend barriers and move from an engagement at a local level to a global stage. Politically active mothers tend to adopt strategies to highlight their pain and suffering by placing tokens of attachment and love, in a public sphere so as to evoke a reaction from the people, to their cause. They are thus able to transform their painful suffering into anger, making it visible in a public space. Therefore, maternal politics is a very active rather than a passive form of politics. According to the author, “although its constituency is diverse, this politics would recognize “private”, “domestic” passions and enact them in public.”

Jennifer Schirmer and Political Motherhood: In her work on motherist movements in Latin America, Schirmer defined the term political motherhood. In the context of the

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12 Ibid, pg.372
13 Ibid
14 Ibid
15 Ibid pg.373
16 Ibid pg.379
movements, she stated that, first, these movements “valourize maternal qualities—
caring, compassion, responsibility for the vulnerable—as encompassing and anchored
in democratic values. They thus deny dualistic theories of gendered opposition
between male and female as embodiments of exclusive qualities,” secondly, “political
motherhood is a process of unfolding consciousness, as women progressively move
into the public sphere.” 17 Elaborating on this further, Werbner states that

political motherhood is, by definition, overt: a move into the public domain
which challenges the confinement of women to domesticity. As such it
necessarily transforms the social order without undermining it. Motherist
movements advocate defence of the integrity of family and the autonomy of
persons within its ambit of responsibility, and stress the centrality of values
associated with motherhood for shaping the wider order of the political
community. They work for women’s causes while advocating a transcendent
world view. 18

According to Werbner, political motherhood is a process of discovery. She opines
that motherist politics for peace can be immensely powerful in a multiple ways.

First, the women who lead them capture the moral high ground by virtue of
their public displays of compassion, generosity and a sense of justice.
Second, their mixed agendas and embeddedness in local traditions enable
them to mobilize ordinary women on a vast scale. Third, they attain a
measure of autonomy and influence through fund-raising activities or
through international support from women’s networks. …Such women dare
to cross class boundaries to acquaint themselves personally with the
sufferings of women and children (and sometimes men) beyond their
everyday world. 19

Thus for women, political motherhood is an enabling factor that allows them to
articulate their positions and legitimize them in the public domain.

Judith S.Tucker has provided a brief overview of the political philosophies underlying
the Mothers Movement in the 21st century. According to her, there are several

17 Werbner, P ‘Political Motherhood and the Feminization of Citizenship: Women’s Activisms and the Transformation of the Public Sphere’ in Yuval-Davis,N and Werbner,P (Eds) Women, Citizenship and Difference, Zubaan, New Delhi,2005, pg. 221
18 Ibid pg.231
19 Ibid pg. 241
frameworks that support the varying ideologies of motherhood. The dominant ideology of motherhood, according to her is the “belief that the quality of maternal attachment is directly and integrally related to the ideal growth and development of the children, and that undesirable outcomes are inevitable for children whose mothers deviate from socially prescribed norms of mothering.” 20 This particular ideology has been widely critiqued because it is an idealized view of mothering, and is far removed from the reality of the day to day living of mothers. Tucker opines that presently, there are three main influences shaping the new thinking on motherhood—liberal feminism, maternalism and feminist care theory. According to Tucker, “Liberal Feminism challenges the dominant ideology of motherhood and offers a vocabulary of rights, responsibilities, justice, equity, empowerment and identity.” 21 This framework views mothers as individuals with social and individual rights and responsibilities and as “equal citizens in an ideally egalitarian society.” 22 Maternalism, on the other hand, “conforms to the dominant ideology of motherhood and emphasizes the importance of maternal well-being to the health and safety of children. Maternalism introduces the language of morality and compassion. …Maternalism overlaps with what has been called ‘difference feminism’—particularly the idea that women are “naturally” or intuitively more emphatic, less exploitative and more closely attuned to relational ambience than men.” 23 The feminist care theory does not conform to the dominant ideology of motherhood. “It introduces the language of care as a public good and supports the definition of care as labour—labour that makes an essential and measurable contribution to social and economic growth. Feminist care theory describes maternal care as a process that flows from a deliberate practice rather than emotional impulse…” 24 Sara Ruddick’s view of maternal practices as being central to caring labour is similar to what Tucker describes as the process of maternal care.

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21 Ibid
22 Ibid
23 Ibid
24 Ibid
Gender, Nation and Motherhood

The normative understanding of womanhood is moulded by the dominant social discourse of the public/private divide. Women are expected to belong to the private sphere while men are expected to belong to the public sphere. By relegating women into the private domain, their voices are often hidden from public memory and their mobility and spaces are restricted.

Although women are readily accepted as the cultural symbols of a society as well as the moral conscience of the nation, for long they have been denied their rightful place in the socio-political arena. Women are often taken as the symbol of nationhood yet they are excluded from the theorization of nationalism. Men have the prerogative to shape the discourse on what or who constitutes the nation and in all of this, the woman is denied a voice. According to Anthias and Yuval-Davis, “women’s oppression is endemic and integral to social relations with regard to the distribution of power and material resources in the society.”

Women are often the worst victims in any conflict that takes place in the society. Since women are believed to be the bearers of their culture and nationhood, whenever there is an attempt to discipline and control the processes of the nation, women are the first to be targeted. In an effort to “protect” them from the contamination of the enemy, women’s bodies are subjected to restraint and control. Their spaces are invaded into, mobility is curtailed and cultural manifestations such as their attire are clamped upon. According to Martin, “the disciplining of the women’s body through the application of state laws can be defined as violence, when it violates the civil rights of female citizens or threatens their health, in the interests of the nation.”

The embedded systems of patriarchy in a culture shape the prevalent discourses, thereby giving them a particular contour and character. Much of our understanding of who a woman is, and the expectations of what she is capable of, is crafted by the all pervasive structures of patriarchal mores and norms that is intricately woven into the fabric of the society. According to Ivekovic and Mostov, “women as mothers are

reproducers of the nation; but they are also thought of as potential enemies of the nation, traitors to it, and collaborators in its death.”

The notions of gender, conflict and state are interlinked and shape the construction of one another. Nira Yuval-Davis speaks about how the notion of manhood and womanhood shapes the construction of our concept of the nation. The author states that although women are often regarded as the cultural symbols of the nation, they are excluded from the theoretical considerations of nationhood and also denied their space from the public political sphere. In the paper “Nationalism and Gender: The Construction of Identity” Nicole Negowetti has dealt with the notion of how gender and nation are interlinked. According to the author, the notions of nationalism, gender and sexuality are socially constructed and they play a significant role in constructing and shaping one another. The author states that women are often signified as bearers of ethnic collectivity and transmitters of its culture. In the nation building process, the nation is often symbolized as a Mother, the entire burden of the cultural collectivity being placed on women. The cultural construction of the identity of men is generally projected as nation-builders and hence protectors, whereas, women are seen as biological producers and thereby, collective bearers of nationhood.

According to Ivekovic and Mostov,

The nation as mother produces an image of the allegorical mother whose offspring are the country’s guardians, heroes and martyrs. Individual mothers are celebrated as instances of this image: their pain and suffering, their sacrifices are recognized as part of the nation’s sacrifice; their individual plights are relevant only to this extent.

It has also been seen that the notion of motherhood that is often employed as a strategy of mobilization during times of conflict, cannot be sustained as a means of genuine women’s empowerment, as it operates within the confines of the traditionally accepted

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27 Ivekovic, R and Mostov, J ‘Introduction’ in From Gender to Nation, Zubaan, India, 2004,pg. 11
30 Ivekovic, R and Mostov, J ‘Introduction’ in From Gender to Nation, Zubaan, India, 2004,pg. 11
role of mothers. 31 Citing the example of The Mothers Front in Sri Lanka, Kumudini Samuel states that, even though, organizations based on a motherist agenda were set up during the conflict, over time, “women themselves were unable to continue with the organization or even attempt to transform it to a more positive, useful and political force, particularly because the base of organization was around the notion of motherhood which did not fundamentally challenge gendered roles.”32

Women’s Resistance and the State

Women have often been found to strategically use their identity as a mother, as an instrument of political resource, in their interactions with the State. According to Diana Taylor, “The society often appropriates and militarizes motherhood and the construction of a “National” motherhood often pits a woman’s duty to her country against her personal obligations to her children.”33

In the context of a conflict, the notion of a ‘good mother’ takes precedence in the popular discourse. Questions of who a mother is and what her roles should be shape the social construction of motherhood, thus adding to the complexities of the ongoing struggle. Mothers are expected to be passive, keep out of politics and fulfill their maternal obligations to further the cause of the struggle. Popular images of a mother are rife with ideas of virginity, unspoiled morality and loyalty to the nation.

Bound by their traditional roles, women tend to utilize their very location to articulate resistance against figures of authority and in the process, re-define their sense of agency. Examples of women’s resistance from across the world (Israel, Palestine, countries in Latin America) reveal how mothers have brilliantly made use of symbols of attachment and love, to register their protest in a public space. Elaborating on it further, Simona Sharoni states,

Symbols and images associated with motherhood, life and care played a significant role in the messages put forth by women peace activists. Sara Ruddick, for example, calls attention to “women who put pillowcases, toys

32 ibid
and other artifacts of ‘attachment’ against the barbed wire fences of missile bases.”

During the political upheaval in Sri Lanka in the 1990s, The Mother’s Front was constituted to protest against the disappearance of a large number of young and middle aged men. According to de Alwis, the Mother’s Front “created a space for themselves within a predominantly patriarchal political landscape by articulating their protest through an available, familiar and emotive discourse of motherhood.” In the initial days, the main activities of The Front pertained to systematically collecting data on those who were missing. Over time, they began to become more visible in their strategies and took to agitating directly. De Alwis states, “In 1991, it organized a massive rally in a suburb of Colombo. Clad in white and holding photographs and pieces of clothing of their “disappeared”, thousands of these “chronic mourners”, mobilizing under the sign of the mother…” New modes of agitation (public mourning, religious rituals like pujas, sorcery, penances, masses etc) were adopted by them and that increasingly brought them into direct confrontation with the State.

Across several geographies and moments in history, women have been found to de-mystify the popularly held imagery of a de-sexualized Mother to confront the State. The Aba War in 1926 in Nigeria and closer home, the 2004 Naked Protest led by the Meira Paibis in the state of Manipur, are stellar examples of how women have utilized their maternal bodies to question the prevalent masculine ideology and patriarchal framework.

Rema Hammani and Carol Bardenstein have described at length how women in Palestine have redefined their identity as mothers and utilized spaces available to them, to organize themselves as political actors. Elaborating on the evolution of women’s activism in Palestine, over the years, Rema Hammami in her article Palestinian Motherhood and Political Activism on the West Bank and Gaza Strip states,

36 Ibid. p.153
37 Ibid. pp.154-155
In the 1970s, after the armed resistance, a new generation of women organizers emerged. The goal of women’s committees, as they were originally conceived, was to mobilize women for the national movement. …the most important development was the opening of the universities, through subsidies to a larger population of people who would never have had the chance to go to the university before. … In trying to organize women in traditional contexts, motherhood was a major way to forge links. Thus, much of the work of the women’s committees involved basic bread-and-butter issues. …The women’s committees stress political education, ideology, and organizing for their activities. They also do political mobilization of mothers on specific issues. For eg., sit ins. ..The women’s committees also work with mothers of martyrs. In the intifada, the mothers of martyrs were brought to public events to be acknowledged for their role in the national struggle. …in the context of the struggle in Palestine, collective recognition and sharing of one’s child’s death is extremely important both emotionally and politically. It is critical for the political work of the women’s committees and nationalist organizations that these mothers’ losses be recognized as contributions to the nation.38

Carol Bardenstein in her article, *Raped Brides and Steadfast Mothers Appropriations of Palestinian Motherhood* talks about how women portrayed themselves as social activists and contributors to the national cause by running day care centres for children as well as food production units (producing goods using seasonal local produce, such as juice, jam, or pickled foods). Bardenstein states,

The idea behind these food production projects is two fold: to provide cheap food goods for the needs of the immediate community, and to contribute, even on a modest scale, to the development of a more self-sufficient economic infrastructure designed to decrease dependence on Israeli products and the Israeli economy. …Vocational cooperatives and training programs have been a salient feature of many women’s centres, training women in skills such as sewing clothes and making sweaters on simple machines, providing the training and access to equipment and materials for nominal

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subsidized fees or free of charge…Women’s centres have developed and supported workshops in which women learn to produce other kinds of crafts and artwork as well, such as copper enamel decorative pieces, paintings, wall-hangings, and leatherwork, most of which articulates nationalistic sentiments and depictions of national struggle. 39

According to Bardenstein, women’s participation at the grassroots can be seen as extension of “traditional and sanctioned “mothering” roles of nurturing—providing nourishment, clothing and protection—and transmitting culture and education.” 40

Thus we see that the literature on motherhood and resistance is replete with notions of the ‘universal mother’, who take it upon themselves to fight for the cause of all sons and daughters, involved in the struggle. According to Samir Das, “the universal mother, freed from the specific context of the biological mother-child relationship and the obligations particular to the context, is the agent of social resistance.”41 Das cites the example of the Naga Mothers Association (NMA). He states,

The NMA, in fact, keeps one day each year for mourning the dead—irrespective of the community he or she belongs to, for it means somebody has lost her son or daughter. It is this metaphor of a universal mother that also drives them to listen to experiences of mothers who do not belong to the same community, open dialogues and build bridges with them.42

The notion of the ‘universal mother’ is amply reflected in the popular discourse circulating within the context of a conflict and is strongly reinforced by the leaders as well as the members of the community.

Elaborating on the different aspects of motherhood that are visible within the context of a conflict, Samir Das proposes the notion of a pure vis a vis a political motherhood. According to him, the notion of pure motherhood is apolitical. He states that, “The image of a mother, according to this paradigm, is a suffering one and she is, at least theoretically, least bothered about the cause her children are fighting for and the paradigm is premised on the ‘expectancy’ of return of her ‘missing children.’ The

39 Ibid pg.176
40 Ibid
41 Samir Kumar Das ‘Ethnicity and Democracy Meet When Mothers Protest’ in Paula Banerjee (Ed) Women in Peace Politics, South Asian Peace Studies, Volume 3,  Sage Publications, 2008 pg. 65
42 Ibid pp.63-64
suffering mother is alone and isolated.” In contrast, “committing the mothers to the justness of the cause their children have been fighting for, organizing them accordingly and thereby constituting them as equal and democratic subjects… makes motherhood political.”

Das is of the opinion that the ‘metaphor of motherhood’ presently in circulation within the Northeastern region of India is that of political motherhood and that allows the mothers as well as mothers organizations to emerge as a distinct, democratic voice within the larger socio-political landscape.

Maternal Pacifism: The Nature vs. Nurture debate

In their diverse capacities, women try to minimize the effects of violence. Caught amidst conflicting situations women often acquire liberation from the old social order. They have to take on roles never thought of possible previously. They become the breadwinners of the family, breaking age-old traditions, moving out of the rigid societal norms to engage in activities, which were earlier thought to be a man’s sole domain. A woman’s involvement in a conflict is often multi-layered. She can be a mother, a wife, a combatant and a breadwinner of the family – shifting from one role to another – to safeguard the interests of her community. Women in their new-found roles, often take initiatives to facilitate changes within their communities, as their efforts make a meaningful dent in the peacemaking process.

In experiencing a new life and having to take on new responsibilities, the notion of freedom too undergoes a change. Thus, more often than not, conflicts lead to the reworking of the societal framework, allowing new avenues and spaces for women to grow and explore their untapped potentialities. But, these positive transformations, can in no way justify a conflict. In such a scenario, the concept of peace defined as reverting back to a pre-conflict state will no longer be desirable. Instead, as Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake has noted that “peace necessarily constitutes a creative

43 Ibid.pp.58-59
44 Ibid
remaking of cultural meanings and agency – a third space between a familiar, often romanticized past and traumatic present.”

This raises certain other questions – Do women have an affinity towards peace? Are they inherently peaceful? Why are women accepted as an embodiment of Peace? To find answers to these questions, we must first try to understand how the notions of femininity and masculinity are culturally constructed and accepted by the society at large. Since time immemorial, certain characteristics have been associated with being a male or a female. When such an understanding is transmitted down from one generation to another, it begins to be accepted as a cultural given.

The notion of masculinity is often characterized by aggression and dominant behaviour and it has become a cultural norm to expect a man to be aggressive, dominant and play the role of a protector. On the other hand, femininity as a notion is culturally constructed to include characteristics such as nurturance and passivity. Thus, these very definitions mould the way a community thinks and expects a man and a woman to behave. According to Goldstein, “killing in war does not come naturally for either gender, yet the potential for war has been universal in human societies. To help overcome soldier’s reluctance to fight, cultures develop gender roles that equate ‘manhood’ with toughness under fire. Across cultures and through time, the selection of men as potential combatants (and women for feminine war support roles) has helped shape the war system.”

Elaborating on the essentialist view on maternal pacifism, noted researcher of motherhood studies, Andrea O’Reilly states how essentialist thinking sees femininity as self-sacrificing. According to her, the basic understanding of the essentialist view is the assumption that women are mothers first and foremost.

Because essentialist views of womanhood focus on the notion that natural female capacities determine that women are primarily motivated to bear children and nurture them to adulthood, essentialism not only shapes notions

of mothering, but also of femininity: women’s feminine nature leads women
to selflessly devote to mothering their children or nurturing others.47

According to Mason, life ‘giving’ precludes life ‘taking’ from the female character,
rendering women incapable of violence, owing to a biological predisposition towards
creating new life and nurturing.48 Franzblau citing Ainsworth and Bowlby, 1991
states how “essentialism assumes that women’s reproductive abilities serve biological
and evolutionary purposes.”49 Thus, it is not surprising to witness, how in times of
conflict, women are expected to use their maternal bodies to produce soldiers to take
forward the struggle and contribute to the national cause.

But, critics of the essentialist view state that the assumption that women are inherently
peaceful is flawed and that there is ample evidence to show how mothers have lent
their support to violent racist movements in the name of protecting their children.50
According to Pankhurst, women can and sometimes do engage in violence, ranging
from complicity to agency.51 One of the major problems with the essentialist view on
maternal pacifism is the belief that all mothers speak with a unified voice, clearly
dismissing their diverse and complex experiences.

Essentialist views on maternal pacifism deny women their individual autonomy and
sense of agency. With its overarching assumptions of a woman’s innately peaceful
nature, essentialist thinking reinforces gendered norms of what is culturally expected
of a woman and adds little to advancing gender equality.

Thus we can see that the notion of motherhood is a social construct and it has far
reaching implications on the evolving debates around issues such as engendering the
nation and maternal pacifism.

42, no. 6, 2005, pg.740
49 Franzblau, S.H. ‘Historicizing Attachment Theory: Binding the Ties that Bind’, Feminism
Psychology 1999; 9; 22, pg.24
50 Orleck, A ‘Tradition Unbound—Radical Mothers in International Perspective’ in A Jetter, A. Orleck
and D. Taylor (Eds.) The Politics of Motherhood: Activist Voices From Left to Right, University Press
of New England, Hanover, 2007,pg.8
51 Pankhurst, D. ‘The ‘sex war’ and other wars: towards a feminist approach to peace building’,
Development in Practice 13, no. 2&3, 2003,pg.32