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**“A Profoundly Gendered Experience  
at Almost Every Level”:  
The Reactions of Boer and British  
Women to the Gendered Character of  
the South African War**

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## An Introduction to ATINER's Conference Paper Series

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The Reactions of Boer and British Women to the Gendered  
Character of the South African War**

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**Abstract**

The first half of the twentieth century saw the publication of wide ranging memoirs, diaries and sworn statements by men and women who experienced the brunt of the South African War. Despite the constructing of women along the lines of Afrikaner nationalist discourse, there has been an attempt to write revisionist accounts of the war – focusing especially on the experiences of women. The aim of this paper is to look at certain aspects of the complex gendered character of women’s agency in the South African War through an exploration of the way women reacted within the confines of nineteenth century gender constructions.

Through a look at how gender constructions were *contested, reconstructed and reinforced* by Boer women in the war, and how British women reacted to the gendered social realities of the concentration camp system, this paper brings the complex nature of certain aspects of gender during wartime into historical perspective. It agrees with Bradford (2002) that women could also construct gender – women could also alter the balance of power between armed men. Both Boer and British women were restricted by nineteenth century gender constructions but an important element of their agency lies in the way they reacted to the distortion of these constructions as a result of war.

The aim is not to simplify women’s experience, but to explore the complexity of gendered social relationships during the South African War by making use of the excellent research already published on the topic, especially the work of P.M. Krebs (1992; 1999), H. Bradford (2002) and E. van Heyningen (1999; 2007; 2008).

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## Introduction

The first half of the twentieth century saw the publication of wide ranging memoirs, diaries and sworn statements by Boer women who experienced the brunt of the South African War as well as records of British women who were swept along the historical tide of this particular Victorian conflict (Hobhouse, 1902; Neethling, 1917; Badenhorst, 1923; Neethling, 1938; Postma 1939; Raath, 1999). In South African historiography Boer women are often depicted as martyrs of the war and, with the notable exception of Emily Hobhouse, British women are seen as outsiders (Postma, 1918; Stokenström, 1921; Coetzer, 2000; Raath, 2003; Changuion, Jacobs & Alberts, 2005).<sup>1</sup> However, on a gendered level these women did have something in common. Both Boer and British women's agency were normatively regulated by the gender constructions of the day. With the disruption the war caused, the gender order all but collapsed in the war-torn Boer Republics and this gave women the chance to actively contest and reconstruct the pre-war gender order.

The aim of this paper is to look at certain aspects of the complex gendered character of women's agency in the South African War through an exploration of the way women reacted within the confines of nineteenth century gender constructions. To realise this aim, this paper is divided into two parts: The first part consists of a broad outline of how Victorian gender constructions were *contested, reconstructed and reinforced* by Boer women during the war and the second part brings the complex nature of gender during wartime in perspective by looking at the reaction of British women to the gendered social realities of the concentration camp system. The aim is not to simplify women's experience, but to explore the complexity of gendered social relationships during the South African War by making use of the excellent research already published on the topic, especially the work of P.M. Krebs (1992; 1999), H. Bradford (2002) and E. van Heyningen (1999; 2007; 2008).

## **Women and gender in the South African War: The contesting, reconstructing and reinforcing of normative gender constructions**

In order to understand women's experience of the war from a more integrated angle than martyrdom and othering. A much broader historical perspective is needed to shed light on the social relationships found in a society distorted by war. In the words of H. Bradford (2002): 'A longer historical perspective is badly needed to explain what contemporaries saw'. This perspective should not exclude the *gendered* character of war. With the outbreak of the war there existed a very fixed idea about women's role in society and women's role in

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<sup>1</sup> This is a historiographical trend that has been followed up to this day. Despite the above mentioned categories to which women are confined, there has been an attempt to incorporate revisionist interpretations of the war, most notably Cuthbertson, G., Grundlingh A. & M.L. Suttie (eds.), (2002) *Writing a wider war: rethinking gender, race and identity in the South African War, 1899-1902*. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press.

war. The following statement by Cooke and Woollacot (1993) sheds light on the nature of these fixed gendered constructions:

*After biological reproduction, war is perhaps the arena where the division of labour along gender lines has been the most obvious, and thus where sexual difference has seemed the most absolute and natural. The separation of 'front' and 'home front' has not only been the consequence of war but has also been used as its justification.*

In Boer society, women were often actively involved in communal life and political affairs, although they had no formal political rights (Bradford, 2002). S.B. Spies (1980) elaborates on this involvement of women by mentioning that women ameliorated the harshness of pioneering conditions, played a leading role in educating their children, and used their "womanly power" to support or incite their men during times of political crisis. Important to note is that women's influence was firmly grounded in their positions as the crux of tightly knit, often large, family units.

With the outbreak of the war most of these family units were immediately disrupted and the Boer women took over as heads of the farms. The South African War led to the contesting of traditional gender categories in the sense that for Boer women the home front became the military front (Van Heyningen, 1999). Following the line of thought in the above mentioned quotation 'front' and 'home front' became blurred during the war. This meant that 'the division of labour along gender lines' was not so obvious anymore as women became active participants in the war, not necessarily by taking up arms, but by contributing to the war effort in various other ways. The ideological construction of gender in definitions of masculinity and femininity were thus contested with Boer women transcending these constructions by ways of the gender inversion created by the war. The war brought disruption on a large scale – it also disrupted the 'traditional' constructions of gender which existed at that time.

In 1899, the idea of women fighting a war was unheard of. Within the lines of the dominant Victorian discourse on gender, it was almost impossible for the British to think of women as a threat. Yet, one of the most important reasons for establishing the concentration camps was because Boer women did indeed pose a viable threat to the British (Krebs, 1992; Pretorius, 2002). Kitchener expanded the original camps for surrendered burghers to include Boer women and children and his justified his decision in the following cable he sent to the War Secretary, Sir John Brodrick: 'Every farm is to them [the Boers] an intelligence agency and a supply depot so that it is almost impossible to surround or catch them'. Therefore Kitchener decided 'to meet some of the difficulties' and 'to bring in women from the more disturbed laagers near the railway and offer the burghers to join them there' (Krebs, 1992). By acting as spies and constantly sending supplies to the front, women were *fighting* this war in their own way. This 'fighting' meant the contesting of the traditional

ideological construction of emphasising sexual difference in determining the division of labour. P. Krebs (1992) effectively points this out when she shows how reluctant the War Office was from the first to admit that one of the reasons for establishing the camps was to keep the Boer women from passing intelligence to the commando's. They were reluctant because in admitting that, they would have been admitting that the women were imprisoned because of their military activities – that they were in fact, *just like men*, prisoners of war. Women also played a leading role in their opposition of British imperialism and threatened to take up arms if men were too timid (Brink, 1990). Although women did not take up arms in an organized way, there were isolated instances of women who were caught up in the hostilities. Examples of these women are those of Mrs. Otto Kranz who were with the men in the field during the Natal campaign, and Mrs. Helena Wagner of Zeerust who 'spent five months fighting in the laagers and trenches without her identity being revealed (Spies, 1980). There might have been other women, but it is important to remember women did not actively participate in the 'violence' of the war. It is interesting to take note of these examples, because not only do they show the contesting of gender constructions, they also reveal the unique femininity of Boer women as opposed to British ideas on femininity.

Some of these British ideas ironically benefited Boer women's participation in the war. Bradford (2002) mentions that the imperial relegation of white women to sub-political status gave Boer women political privileges. Not only did women not have to take oaths of neutrality or surrender their guns, but they were also not imprisoned for flaunting republican sympathies. Boer women were not silenced and they expressed their anger loudly and vigorously (Van Heyningen, 1999). However, women's privilege was not solely dependent on the gender constructions of men. In the words of Bradford (2002): 'Women could also construct gender; women could also alter the balance of power between armed men'. The best example of women reconstructing gender and employing it to contribute to the war effort, was their attitude towards and treatment of men who surrendered. Women not only contributed to the war-effort by acting as spies, supplying men on commando with food and other needs, but their sometimes fanatical patriotism also made them 'a bad and dangerous lot' in the eyes of the British (Spies, 1980). Genl. C.R. de Wet, who recruited around 1 500 men for his crucial Sannah's Post victory, was not solely responsible for men's return to war. Boer women used the daily opportunities for gender politics and their domestic power to make what men who had returned from battle thought would be a refuge, singularly unpleasant. Women refused to feed 'their' men, threatened to replace them on commando and taunted them for being less than men by being at home rather than fighting (Bradford, 2002). Thus, shamed and opposed by their women, men rejoined commandos. J.H. Breytenbach (1983) claims that the 'fanaticism of the women has done much to stiffen Boer aggression' and that pressure from Boer women was the 'one element... that could deal with deserters in a much more effective manner than the government'. It is evident that through their subtle use of gender politics, and their fierce patriotism, women reconstructed gender norms



through their own making. In the case of the South African War Boer women contributed to creating the *bittereinders* by forcing their men back to war. In this way they reconstructed their own gender and contested traditional categories through influencing war events and outcomes.

Not only military leaders like Kitchener were deeply hostile to any suggestion that women had a place in war, but the idea of women ‘making war’ was even more repulsive in terms of Victorian ideas of femininity (Bradford, 1999, 2008). The confusion created by the contesting of gender constructions is evident in the words of the war correspondent, Edgar Wallace. He acknowledges that ‘[w]omen have played a great part in this war, not so much the part of heroine as of spy’ and that ‘through ill-nature [Boer] women and children make war on us’, but the very next thing he says is ‘we loftily refuse to acknowledge they are making war’ (Krebs, 1992). This self-contradiction may be seen as a consequence of the difficulty created by the reconstruction of gendered identities during war time. Within the context of jingoism and in Social Darwinian terms, Boer women were closer to nature than British women and one commentator noted that ‘the distinctive feature of Boer life is dirt’ (Lacy, 1900). Compared with British femininity, Boer women were thus already seen as belonging to a lower class, but through the eyes of contemporaries ‘they were acting against the nature of women when they made war’ (Krebs, 1992).

The contesting and reconstructing of gender constructions during the South African War is, however, only one side of the ideologically constructed gender coin. By arguing that war is a ‘gendering experience’, Jacklyn Cock (1991) touches upon the important phenomenon of the reinforcing of gender constructions during wartime in her work, *Colonels and cadres: War and gender in South Africa*:

*It [war] both uses and maintains the ideological construction of gender in the definitions of “masculinity” and “femininity”. Women are widely cast in the role of “the protected” and “the defended”, often excluded from military service, and almost always... excluded from direct combat. Dividing the protector from the protected, defender from defended, is crucial to both sexism and militarism.*

The ‘protected’ and ‘defended’ are thus stereotypes reinforced by war. The enemy is formulated as ‘the other’ and the sufferers on the home side as ‘victims’ (Van Heyningen, 2007). However, this is not the totality of the picture of war. A look at the reinforcing of gender constructions during the South African War should uncover some of its complexity. Both the Boers and the British partook in the reinforcing of gender constructions.

It is interesting to note that it was mostly the British and *Boer women themselves* who portrayed women as helpless victims, suffering passively. As part of the rhetoric of war, the British used the plight of Uitlander women, for example: they were the victims of Boer brutality and repression (Van

Heyningen, 2007). Women as victims thus became part of the justification of war. This reinforced gender construction of women who need masculine protection was not only used as justification for the war itself, but also for the concentration camps. Reinforcing the idea of women as the 'protected' in war was consistent with nineteenth century ideology about gender relations. If the British were going to imprison the Boer women and their children, this ideology had to be followed. Therefore, the British War Secretary, Brodrick, structured the camps around the idea of 'protection' and by doing so also reinforced the masculine idea of the chivalric (in this case very British) male 'protector'. In other words, British men were adopting the duties evaded by the 'unmanly' Boers on commando who had 'deserted' their families, leaving them to starve (Krebs, 1992).

The gender construction of women as weak passive sufferers, victims of war, unable to take care of themselves also connected with another prominent Victorian ideology, namely that of the sexual savagery of the black man towards the white woman. This was not only voiced by the British supporters of the war, but also by pro-Boers and Boer women. As the war disrupted economic life, fear and insecurity spread amongst the Boer women and farm labourers. This was intensified by the rumours of rape and murder which alarmed the women while the black workers silently vanished (Van Heyningen, 1999). British authorities and supporters of the war used racism in their rhetoric to produce a particular chivalric reaction in the British male. In the words of Krebs (1992): 'Advocates of the camps used the image of white womanhood in danger to justify a system that proved deadly to just those women it claimed to be protecting'. Pro-Boers, who were not defenders of the camps, like Emily Hobhouse, also agreed that white women needed protection by white men and from black men. Hobhouse states her case by pointing to examples of black 'cruelty and barbarity' (Hobhouse, 1902). Hobhouse and the pro-Boers also declared that women were both incapable of taking care of themselves and incapable of posing a threat to the British army (Krebs, 1992). The reason for this reinforcing is that they were thinking within the prominent gender order of the time, specifically *British* ideas. This may account for the fact that the Boer women were mostly responsible on their own for contesting these constructions.

Although Boer women contested the dominant gender constructions, they were mostly constrained by their gender. A good example of this is the case of Sarah Raal. In her autobiographical account she makes a transition from a story of "a helpless woman left alone at the mercy of savages" to an adventure story of narrow escapes and brushes with the British because of her escape from the Springfontein camp in the Free State (Raal, 1938). Van Heyningen (1999) shows, however, that even if Raal was courageous and independent, her place in the Boer commando was inhibited by her gender. She was able to escape because she could depend on the *protection* of her brothers' commando. After this commando was captured, she no longer felt able to make a second escape. Reinforcing in this case was not the 'natural physical weakness of women'

which prevented her from escaping again and rejoining Boer forces, *but her own acceptance of her gender role* (Van Heyningen, 1999).

**“[A] profoundly gendered experience at almost every level”: Determining some aspects of gender in shaping British women’s reaction to the concentration camp system**

To achieve the overall aim of determining certain aspects of the complex gendered character of women’s agency in the South African War it is also important to look at one of the most controversial aspects of this conflict, namely the concentration camps. In her report to the committee of the South African Distress Fund, Emily Hobhouse realised that ‘[c]onsidering the changing condition of the Camps, it is hardly possible to draw up an ordinary conventional report’ (Raath, 1999). The same applies for determining the gendered experience of Boer women in the camps. Because of the diversity and number of camps, and the fact that the conditions constantly changed, it will only be possible to give a *general overview* of the camps’ gendered social structure. Even though the suffering of Boer women has been over-emphasised, it is something that cannot be ignored in *any* study focusing on Boer women in the camps. Instead of seeing women as ‘passive sufferers’ this paper portrays them as active agents who (acknowledging a few exceptions) made ‘willing sacrifices’. Van Heyningen (2007) calls the camp system ‘a profoundly gendered experience at almost every level’. This gendered experience will be discussed by looking at the reactions of two British women, Hobhouse and Fawcett and secondly one experience and practice of Boer-women which characterised and influenced their lives in almost every concentration camp will be evaluated.

The dual nature of sexuality/gender manifested itself in the establishment of the camps. Taking the masculine nature of the imperial enterprise into account it should be noted that in the South African War period many of the leading imperialists, including C. Rhodes, A. Milner, R. Baden-Powell, L. Jameson and H. Kitchener, were bachelors (Spies, 1977). It is no surprise that from the beginning the concentration camps were run not by men, but by *military* men, isolated from women and the world of women. Van Heyningen (1999) rightly shows that women’s needs were little understood and were discounted. Their homes were the focus of their authority in the family and the removal from their homes was immensely disempowering and in the camps their right to manage their lives were restricted by an authoritarian male dominance. Thus the gender politics of this distorted society were totally alien to them.

The military administration caused a lot of problems and the gender politics involved is interesting to note. For the British the correct portrayal of the camps was crucial to win public opinion. For this reason the military and jingo newspapers spoke of ‘refugee’ camps. Emily Hobhouse criticized the use of this term by saying: ‘Their line generally is to speak of “refugee” camps and make out the people are glad of their protection. This is absolutely false. They

are compelled to come and are wholly prisoners' (Krebs, 1992). The anti-war newspapers, the *Manchester Guardian* and the *Daily News* referred to the camps as 'prison camps' and after the mortality rates became known in Britain the *Daily News* labelled the camps 'death camps' (Krebs, 1992). Whatever terms the press, British government or military used the fact remains that male assumptions permeated much of the administration of the camps. Despite the numerical predominance of women and children, refugees were invariably referred to as "he" (Van Heyningen, 2007). This sheds light on the social problems the South African War created when Boer women and children were drawn into the question of warfare and shows that previous assumptions about gender had to be revised (reconstructed) to effectively deal with the challenges the British faced. Whether or not the British totally succeeded in making the necessary mind shift remains an open question. The contemporary who did perhaps appreciate the true nature and scope of the concentration camp question was Emily Hobhouse. She often referred to the camps as the '[w]omen's camps' or the 'women and children's camps' (Raath, 1999).

Her emergence on the scene sheds an interesting light on the dominant gender order of Victorian Britain. In the nineteenth century it was accepted practice for a middleclass lady to take an active interest in certain charities and humanitarian efforts. Krebs (1992) effectively conveys this gender construction when she writes that in the autumn of 1900 women in the anti-war South Africa Conciliation Committee 'took the traditional feminine step of collecting clothing, blankets, and money for the camp inhabitants'. These women organised themselves into the separate South African Women and Children's Distress Fund. Emily Hobhouse was the fund's chief fundraiser. On 7 December 1900 she sailed for Cape Town and there she heard for the first time of the existence of the concentration camps. She contrived to obtain an interview with Milner, who finally consented and reluctantly allowed her to visit the camps and to distribute food and clothing paid for from the monies she had raised for the distress fund. In January 1901 she again sailed out for Cape Town again, this time with goods and money (Farwell, 1976).

In Britain Hobhouse's publicity from the very start emphasised her gender (Krebs, 1992). In her *Report of a Visit to the Camps of Women and Children in the Cape and Orange River Colonies*, published in June 1901 after she returned to Britain, Hobhouse treats the concentration camps as a *women's* problem. She is sensitive for the special needs and wants of women. For her the camp system itself was a gendered one and its problems were due largely to 'crass male ignorance, stupidity, helplessness and muddling', she declared in her first month of visiting the camps. Commenting on how ineffectively men responded to the basic daily needs of women, Hobhouse declared in her report: 'Men don't think of these things unless it is suggested to them; they simply say, "How dirty these people are!"' (Krebs, 1992).

Hobhouse's exposé of the unhealthy conditions and high death rates in the camps in her report was picked up by anti-war newspapers and Hobhouse embarked on a national speaking tour. B. Farrel's (1976) high praised

assessment of Hobhouse has strong gender undertones when viewed within the context of the dominant gender-ideologies of Victorian Britain:

*Emily Hobhouse was a woman of strong passions, a sharp sense of righteous indignation with a compulsion to help underdogs, the disadvantaged, and the unpopular. All of the accumulated force of the suppressed rebellion of her first thirty-five years under her stern-willed father seems to have erupted when she saw other women and their children paying a male-exacted price for the determination of their men to fight.*

Looking at Farrel's fair assessment it may even be said that Hobhouse also contested the traditional gender constructions she was confined to before the war. The war gave her a platform to enunciate the characteristics that typical Victorian middleclass women were not supposed to have and gave an outlet to the frustrations she must have lived through during her patriarchal dominated childhood. Thus the complex nature of gender during wartime had far reaching implications, contesting and consequently regulating, the gender-constructions of this particular (and important) Victorian lady. Further contesting and reconstructing of traditional Victorian gender-constructions also took place within the ranks of British women, especially in the case of the suffragist, Millicent Garrett Fawcett.

In response to the public stir created by the Hobhouse revelations, War Secretary, John Brodrick, appointed Fawcett to assemble a committee of women to investigate the camps and initiate reforms. What were this particular British woman's reactions to the camp-system? As already mentioned, by imprisoning Boer women and children, the British were going to have to do it within a discourse consistent with nineteenth century ideology about gender relations and Brodrick structured it around the idea of "protection". Hobhouse agreed with the presupposition of 'protection', but Fawcett refused the rhetoric of protection entirely (Krebs, 1992). One is inclined to wonder about the implications of Fawcett's feminism in the decision of the British government to appoint someone of her calibre, someone fighting *against* the gender order of the day. This might be the reason she refused the rhetoric of protection. By doing this she was a good choice for the British government, as she saw the camps necessary solely 'from a military point of view'. However, she didn't follow the British government's line of thinking that the women posed no threat. Instead she followed a feminist line of thought in asserting that if women wanted to make war, they should expect no special treatment and, just like men, suffer some of the consequences for their acts. The following quotation in the work of Krebs (1992) shows that she was firm in her assertion that Boer farms had been centres for supplying

*correct information to the enemy about the movements of the British. No one blames the Boer women on the farms for this; they have taken an active part on behalf of their own people in the war,*

*and they glory in the fact. But no one can take part in war without sharing in its risks, and the formation of the concentration camps is part of the formation of the fortune of war.*

Being a feminist, it might have been easier for Fawcett to see women as being capable of making war. She was also markedly biased against the Boers (Spies, 1977). She maintained that the camps were a military necessity and because the women had taken an active part on behalf of their country they must share in the consequences (Krebs, 1992). The statement of Fawcett may be interpreted as, unintentionally, acknowledging the fact that the camps were indeed a 'special' kind of prisoner of war camp. However, the terms negotiated by Hobhouse in her report and the bettering of conditions after the Ladies' Commission were sent to investigate the camp, rules out the assertion that the camps were outright prisoner of war camps (Krebs, 1992). The complex gendered character of these questions which arise as a consequence of outbreak of the South African War interestingly contrasts the interrelated themes underlying the reactions of Emily Hobhouse and Millicent Fawcett. Hobhouse, arguing from a solely humanitarian point of view, followed the government's rhetoric of protection while Fawcett, being a feminist, supported the masculine government's war effort, but arguing from a more feminist perspective, denied the rhetoric of protection. Thus, it is evident that the question of gender should *always* be seen within the context of interrelating motives and ideologies of those involved.

## **Conclusion**

Both Boer and British women were restricted by nineteenth century gender constructions but an important element of their agency lies in the way they reacted to the distortion of these constructions as a result of war. The difference between Boer femininity and British femininity (or constructions of gender) may be one of the reasons explaining why the behaviour of Boer women was more acceptable in Boer society while being unheard of in British society. It is evident that gender constructions were contested and reinforced because of the disruption caused by the war. It should also be seen within the context of the British war rhetoric. Gender constructions were contested when women acted against the grain of British gender politics and became a *threat* to masculine British authority. In the same instance the British reinforced certain gender constructions by posing women as 'victims' of war as opposed to a threat. By emphasising women as the ones being victimised, the rhetoric portrayed Boer men as cowards who couldn't protect their women. The 'correct' behaviour of these men would be to, ironically, rescue their women from the camps by surrendering. Gender constructions was thus not only used by the British to justify the camp system, but it was also used a way to encourage/force Boer men to surrender. These constructions were used along the line of *discourse* by the portrayal of women as the 'protected' and 'defended'. Therefore Boer men,

to adhere to the masculine values of the day, had to give up their roles as 'protectors' and 'defenders' of the *Vaderland* (Fatherland) and, by laying down arms, become the protector and defender of his woman and children. The sexism referred to by Van Heyningen (1999; 2007) in this kind of war discourse is evident. One thing, however, is certain: some women did act as active agents during the war, manipulating gender constructions and *all* actively tried to cope with the distortion brought about by the South African War, be it as 'passive innocent sufferers' or as women acting as spies with a fierce sense of independence. The gender-discourse of war clearly follows a very complex circle.

This complexity is also evident in how two very different British women reacted to the social realities Boer women faced in the camps. Emily Hobhouse may be stereotyped as the typical British middleclass women taking a special interest in a humanitarian effort and Fawcett as member of the emerging class of feminists, representing a male dominated government, but seen as well-enough equipped to deal with the camp system, mainly on account of her female gender and jingoism. It was particularly the latter's jingoism which didn't allow her to apply her feminism to a sympathy with the position of the Boer women.

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