Jens Stoltenberg and Angelina Jolie call for NATO intervention to promote “gender equality”

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NATO General Secretary Jens Stoltenberg and actress Angelina Jolie have joined forces to project the US-led war alliance as a progressive role model for gender politics and a “leading protector” of women’s rights.

Their op-ed in the *Guardian* last weekend, “Why NATO must defend women’s rights”, is presented as a joint mission to secure the “fundamental promise in the UN Charter of equal rights and dignity for women.”

One rubs one’s eyes in disbelief. Written in defence of an organisation that is the primary source of warmongering, by its leader and chief propagandist and an Ayn Rand devotee and self-styled “humanitarian”, the op-ed could be mistaken for satire.

Claiming that NATO was founded to safeguard “the freedom of its peoples”, the authors assert that, for 70 years, the US-led bloc has stood for the “defence of democracy, individual liberty, the rule of law and the UN Charter.”

In fact, from its foundation in April 1949 until the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact in July 1991, NATO’s role was dictated by confrontation with the Soviet Union. To this end, it not only fomented a nuclear arms race but was involved in numerous conflicts and interventions from the Korean War to Cuba.

With the juridical liquidation of the Soviet Union in 1991, NATO’s aggressive stance became more overt as it mounted direct military operations in the Balkans, Afghanistan and, more recently, Libya and Syria aimed ultimately at encircling, and dismembering Russia and China.

Hundreds of thousands of people have lost their lives as a result and millions more have been injured and displaced. These wars, moreover, have been accompanied by the evisceration of all pretence at maintaining democratic norms—including extraordinary rendition and targeted assassinations by drone strikes, not to speak of the gutting of civil liberties “at home.”

This has been the case irrespective of the lofty claims of “humanitarian intervention” and the citing of a “Responsibility to Protect” that accompanied these wars. It is a matter of fact that wherever NATO goes, abject misery and horror follows.

Stoltenberg/Jolie’s article represents a desperate attempt to rebuild NATO’s threadbare credibility in the face of this record.

Sexual violence is “one of the prime reasons” for female oppression, the op-ed argues, and this “accounts in large part for why it is often more dangerous to be a woman in a warzone today than it is to be a soldier.”

“[C]onflicts in which women’s bodies and rights are systematically abused last longer, cause deeper wounds and are much harder to resolve and overcome.”

The essential political aim of such claims is to argue that “Ending gender-based violence is a vital issue of peace and security as well as of social justice. NATO can be a leader in this effort.”

One would not normally engage in an argument over who suffers most in war. After all, the overwhelming majority always suffer in war. That is why anyone guided by humanitarian and democratic impulses seeks to prevent it. But Stoltenberg and Jolie do not possess an ounce of such sensibilities between them.

An estimated 31,000 civilians have been killed in Afghanistan alone since 2001 and upwards of 30,000 in Libya since the invasion of 2011, to take just two examples.

An exact breakdown of these figures along gender lines is difficult to obtain. The casualties will undoubtedly include many women, and an untold number of children who are especially vulnerable to IEDs and the

catastrophic breakdown of health and welfare provision that invariably accompanies war.

Such surveys that have been carried out, however, show that the assertion that women are at greater or particular risk from conflict, and that this is why NATO as the guarantor of gender equality, must intervene, has no foundation in fact.

A report by the International Peace Research Institute, Oslo, *Armed Conflict Deaths disaggregated by Gender* (2009), for example, used different datasets and investigated different conflicts and time periods to try and establish who is more likely to be the casualties of war. It is most significant because it was researched in line with UN-led efforts to focus on gender.

It cites several studies, involving deaths in conflicts in more than 13 countries, from Iraq, the Democratic Republic of Congo to Kosovo. While their findings varied, all showed a higher prevalence of violent deaths or from war-related trauma among men. The general conclusion, the IPRI found was that "men are more likely to die during conflicts, whereas women die more often of indirect causes after the conflict is over."

In cases of sexual violence, moreover, reality is not nearly as one-sided as Stoltenberg/Jolie make out. An authoritative study by Lara Stemple, of the University of California's Health and Human Rights Law Project, *Male Rape and Human Rights*, notes that sexual violence against men has been used as a "weapon of wartime or political aggression" in numerous countries, with up to 80 percent of male political prisoners in several conflicts surveyed reporting sexual torture and rape.

Significantly, it cites Abu Ghraib in Iraq, where US soldiers forced detainees "into acts such as nude posing in piles, group masturbation, and simulated sex, several of which were photographed. Other detainees were sodomized and some had electrical wires attached to their genitals."

Male rape and sexual torture are reportedly rife in Libya following the NATO-backed invasion, which saw former leader Muammar Gaddafi sodomised with a bayonet and then murdered by western-allied forces.

Stoltenberg/Jolie couldn't care less. They are not out to prevent conflict, but are seeking a pretext to create it. Thus, in a modern day-twist to the "white man's burden", they advocate the fight for "cultural change" and "gender equality" through the barrel of a gun.

The article appeared against the backdrop of a vicious, anti-democratic campaign over sexual harassment piloted in Hollywood—America's "Scarlet Letter" moment. As the *World Socialist Web Site* has explained, the "Me Too" movement represents an effort by an affluent section of the middle class to achieve a greater share of privileges and wealth.

Stoltenberg/Jolie are now attempting to utilise the same type of self-absorption and indifference to social inequality amongst this constituency to build support for militarism and war.

Their appeal is a weaponisation of feminism in the service of NATO and of imperialist reaction. This is especially necessary when the imperialist alliance is preparing even greater crimes that threaten humanity with a new world war, fought with nuclear weapons.

Only last month, NATO agreed plans for a major military escalation in Europe, including two new military command centres. While Stoltenberg claimed this was necessary due to Moscow's "aggression", it is NATO that is provocatively building up its military forces along Russia's borders, including the deployment of thousands of troops.

It is to conceal its predatory aims that Stoltenberg/Jolie attempt to recast NATO as a tool of female emancipation.

NATO will integrate "gender issues into its strategic thinking", reinforce a "culture of integration of women throughout the organisation, including in leadership positions", promote "the role of women in the military", and deploy "gender advisers to local communities", where "NATO's female soldiers are able to reach and engage with local communities," they write.

Without a trace of shame, the op-ed targets Ukraine and Syria as in particular need of NATO's gender crusade. This on behalf of an organisation that supported fascists in the first conflict, and worked with Islamic extremists, such as the Al Nusra front in the other.

So much for women's rights! Their white-wash of NATO, this imperialist thieves' kitchen, should be treated with the contempt it deserves.