



WILPF Conference: Women's Power to Stop War

April 27-29, 2015 in The Hague

By Louise Ricknert

On the 28th of April 1915, 1,300 of women gathered in The Hague to show their opposition to war and to call for women's political participation. A hundred years later, WILPF's conference *Women's Power to Stop War* was organised to celebrate its anniversary and discuss peace and security in a holistic way, addressing the root causes of conflict. 48 sessions were held during the three days, highlighting numerous interesting subjects and with participants from over 82 countries. In this report I will present some of the issues that were discussed during the conference. First I would like to express my biggest gratitude to Jane Addams Peace Association and the Kay Camp fund for giving me the opportunity to participate in this conference and write this report. As a young member of WILPF, the conference and the anniversary celebration was a great source of inspiration for me and gave me a great opportunity to learn more about WILPF's and several other organisations' peace work.

On the first day, Amal Basha from Yemen stood up from the audience and shared her experience of becoming a refugee while attending the conference. In support of Amal Basha, WILPF decided to send letters to a number of embassies calling for the cessation of the transfer of arms to Yemen and all military actions by all actors inside and outside the country, and for the initiation of inclusive peace negotiations. These letters were sent to the embassies of Saudi Arabia, Iran, Yemen, Russia, China, Germany, the United Kingdom, the United States of America, France and Egypt as well as the Representation of the European Commission in the Netherlands. I believe the opportunity to being able to listen to uncensored experiences such as Amal Basha's, is of great importance for our unity and hence continued work, as it shows us the true and long-term consequences of patriarchal systems.

The first day of conference began with a welcome speech by the Conference facilitator, Joy Ada Onyesoh, President and International Executive Committee Member from WILPF Nigeria. Following this, WILPF's new International President Kozue Akibayashi from Japan was introduced and welcomed with applause. Aside from the celebration, Joy Ada Onyesoh also took the time to remember those who could not attend the conference and reminded us of the struggle the organisation is facing. As part of the grand opening "The Movement Starts Now", WILPF's Secretary General, Madeleine Rees from the UK, began her speech by remembering the founding of WILPF a hundred years ago. Dr. Shirin Ebadi, an Iranian judge, activist and Nobel Peace Laureate, then held an emotional speech where she spoke of how men created the wars, and how Islam today is being misinterpreted and misused by the militant group that calls itself "Islamic State". Looking to solutions, Dr. Shirin Ebadi suggested an UN convention to reduce states military budget by ten percent to instead invest these resources in education. In relation to the use of drone warfare in the Middle East, Dr. Shirin Ebadi ended her strong speech with the statement:

The day we see the west throwing books instead of bombs – we will see another world

-Dr. Shirin Ebadi

Uniting over differences and self-criticism

In order to fully unite I believe we must knock down all barriers that may hinder us. The capability to work in solidarity across geographical and national borders, ages, sexualities, genders, ethnicities, cultures and religions is crucial in order to fulfil our goals of ending the patriarchal systems and militarisation. In this process we must also look at our own organisation and question our own perspectives and behaviours from decision making to practices. We must not be alike to treat each other with mutual respect and understanding for each other's differences. Differences should not be seen as hinders, but as opportunities which allow us to learn from each other and hence strengthen our organisation.

In relation to uniting over our differences, the representation within the peace movement and the WILPF organisation was raised several times. In the first plenary session on the 27th of April, WILPF's Secretary General Madeleine Rees noted that around eighty countries were represented at this Conference. She paid a special tribute to the freedom fighters that had travelled from conflict and warzones and emphasised the importance of their participation. Following this, Leymah Gbowee from Liberia, Nobel Peace Laureate and peace activist, also raised the issue of representation within the organisation and noted that in difference to the conference in 1915, the African continent was represented this time. A statement that was met with applauds and cheers. Leymah Gbowee held an inspiring speech in which she spoke about how to keep the fire of activism burning, and about women's peace work from the First World War until today's challenges with trafficking, fundamentalism, arms, and degradation of the environment. Gbowee quoted a broken soldier's appeal to a nurse during the First World War: "Can you women do something?" and her own answer was clear: We are doing something and we will continue to do so. However, she also emphasised that we cannot carry this heavy burden alone. Instead we all need to unite globally, men and women together, she stressed. During the session "Root causes: Gendered power in our world" Zahra' Langhi, from Libyan Women's platform for Peace, also spoke about WILPF's representation and noted that this time representatives from the Middle East were present. She then spoke of the transition of feminism, from white and bourgeoisie feminism, and the need for us all to question our own perspectives in order to increase our inclusiveness.

During the session "Root causes: Gendered power in our world", international lawyer and gender justice advocate Patricia Sellers stressed that we must speak up against the gender-based genocide that is taking place. She also reminded us not to separate ourselves from the

victims but to remember that what is happening to a sister is happening to us. She then called for prosecution for the crimes against peace, and emphasised that non-state actors also need to be brought to justice. During the same session, Jineth Bedoya Lima, a Colombian journalist and a member of the Survivors United for Action, argued that we need to break the silence about sexual violence and showed great courage and strength as she shared her personal experience as a survivor from a kidnapping and being exposed to sexual violence. By sharing her story, she reminded us of the importance to tell our stories and show the faces behind every story. Jineth Bedoya Lima also argued for us all to unite past our differences and reminded us to materialise our words into action.

The Engagement of Men and Boys for Gender Equality

The need to continue opposing the patriarchal systems with its hierarchies and gender norms permeated all three days of the conference. As a part of this work, the engagement of men and boys into the work of gender equality, peace and social were raised. Both as a part of future work as well as the current preventive work organised by many organisations and sister sections. During the session “Root Causes; Power, War and Weapons”, Dean Peacock from South Africa, Executive Director at Sonke Gender Justice, described how the patriarchal systems suppress and subordinate us all into different hierarchies and stressed that we all therefore have to unite and oppose it. He also emphasised the importance to acknowledge and support men’s peace work as this is often is deliberately excluded today, due to its contradiction to the masculine gender norm.

During the session “Engaging Men and Boys for Gender Equality, Peace and Social Justice: rationale, Strategies and Accountabilities”, Natkho Geres from Promundo US and Henri Myrntinen from Finland, Head of Gender Team at International Alert, emphasised especially the importance of preventive work. Henri Myrntinen also noted that men and women, militarism and violence, together sustain gender norms. We need to look to our own problems and not simply classify them as work of others, Henri Myrntinen argued, and exemplified with the need to work against the sexual violence in Sweden and Finland. He then stressed that we should not strive to change the patriarchal systems but rather destroy it. This process will be far from pleasant and if we do not feel uncomfortable in that change, it means we are not doing enough, he argued. Anthony Keedi from Lebanon, Program Manager at ABAAD: Resource Center for Gender Equality, gave extra attention to the role of parenting and

stressed that we ought to reflect on how we parent and not simply that we parent, as some relations may be abusive.

It is far easier to prevent violence than to stitch up a broken skull.

-Natkho Geres

The engagement of men and boys into the work of gender equality, peace and social was also discussed in relation to preventive work and peace building during the session “Crossing borders: Regional and National Strategies to Prevent Conflict in West and Central Africa”.

Peace building and Preventive Work on a Local Level

Moderator Jyoiti Sanghera, Chief of Section on Human Rights, Economic and Social Issues at UNHCR, activist and women’s rights writer from India, began the plenary session “Root causes: Gendered power in our world” by speaking of the big tide of people fleeing conflict and warzones in this very moment as weapons continue to be brought into these areas. She exemplified with the weapons that are being brought from the UK into Yemen. The plenary session offered several critical perspectives on the constructions of violent masculinities and patriarchy, and the engagement of men and boys into the work for peace and gender equality was raised as a crucial conflict preventive tool. Cynthia Cockburn, London based feminist researcher and writer, spoke of how violence does not stand alone, but rather is connected to a pattern that requires a coherent approach. She spoke about how we often assume violence to come from the outside when it in fact often comes from within our own homes, and took the example of the campaign “Gun free kitchen tables” in Israel. Patricia Sellers shared some very interesting points regarding gender equality and the engagement of men. She spoke about how the hierarchies within the patriarchal systems order all people into oppressive structures and explained that:

Feminism does not blame men per se, but the system that forms them.

-Patricia Sellers

During the first plenary session, Máiread Maguire Nobel Peace Laureate from Northern Ireland, emphasised the role of peaceful solutions in conflicts and WILPF’s continued work for disarmament. With her experience from Northern Ireland, Máiread Maguire offered us an insight in Europe’s oldest ongoing conflict and explained what local peace work can look

like. She described how the technique of demonizing the “enemy” often is used to legitimise violence and emphasised the importance of respecting each other’s different stances and uphold human dignity, human rights and international law by using non-violent solutions in conflicts. Peaceful solutions are often underestimated but in fact, counterparts in conflicts are often more diplomatic and willing to cooperate than many would expect, she emphasised.

During the session “From Global Agreements to Local Implementation: Beyond 1325”, Carol Cohen spoke about how we can renew the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 and how we can implement it at a local level. During the session one of the participants raised the issues of Nicaragua and the Canadian nickel companies, and the violations of the civilian’s land rights. The situation in Liberia and Sierra Leone where women are losing their land due to agricultural interests and industries of biofuels were raised as another example of the consequences of financial interests. Alike Madeleine Rees’s statement at the grand opening, the need to include gender rights in every decision making process was discussed and the implementation of 1325 was brought down to a local level, with a focus on the role of infrastructure. The need for gender sensitive planning was noted and the inclusiveness of all citizens’ into the planning was emphasised as a pillar in peace building and as part of healing process in post-conflict countries. The safety effects of the exclusion of pedestrians and women from the decision-making processes were discussed, and Chechnya was brought up as an example where the elites have built highways for high-speed cars that serve their own interest.

Negative Masculinity and the Security for Human Rights Defenders

The security of peace workers and human right defenders was also discussed throughout the conference. Binalakshmi Nepram, Founder and Secretary General of Manipur Women Gun Survivors/Control Arms Foundation of India, is a civil rights activist living under threat in this very moment. During the session “Root Causes, Power, War and Weapons” Binalakshmi Nepram enlightened us of the forgotten conflict in the Northeast region Manipur in India. Although 50 000 people have been killed, she declared that the conflict is not classified as war. She described how Mongol groups are being treated as second-class citizens, and how drugs and weapons continue to pour into the region. During the session “Root causes: Gendered power in our world” Zahra’ Langhi continued to speak of the worrying situation of freedom advocates and activists. She told us of her friend, the human rights lawyer and revolutionary leader for human rights and political participation of women Salwa Bugaighis, who was assassinated just after casting her vote in Libya’s national election in June 2014.

While Libya has transitioned into an electoral democracy on paper, Zahra' Langhi described how the country continues to struggle with impunity and violence due to great amount of weapons that continue to circulate within the country. In response to the situation in Libya she called for holistic action for human rights and disarmament, and an end to the empowering of warlords. Sylvie Jacqueline Ndongmo, President and founder of WILPF Cameroon, continued to speak of the security for human rights defenders during the plenary session "Root causes: Gendered power in our world". She raised poverty as a breeding ground for violence, taking Boko Haram as one example, and emphasised state's responsibility to satisfying peoples basic needs. Yanar Mohammed from Women Peace Activist Iraq spoke about The US occupation in Iraq and how the forced establishment of capitalism created a base of discontent for the IS to prosper from. She described how women are being kidnapped, and sold into domestic and sexual slavery by the IS. Zahra' Langhi then declared the IS a postmodern phenomenon that not only is taking place in the Middle East. Instead, she argued, the IS is an example of negative masculinity, and therefore a universal problem that requires a universal solution.

The subject continued to be discussed during the session "Crossing Borders: regional and National Strategies to Prevent Conflict in West and Central Africa". Sylvie Jacqueline Ndongmo began the session by arguing that a country is not in peace only because there is an absence of war. She described that issues such as poverty, illiteracy and inequality between the genders can be just as severe as a war and must be taken seriously. All three of the participants described how they have experienced threats due to their peace work. Joy Ada Onyesoh, Founder and President of WILPF Nigeria and International Executive Committee Member, shared how she and her family have received threats, and Sylvie Jacqueline Ndongmo described how opponents have sabotaged their work by stealing her computer. The hold governments have on citizens and freedom advocates was exemplified with the story of Annie Matundu Mbambi, President and Founder of WILPF Democratic Republic of Congo, who has had difficulties obtaining visas due to her peace work.

Cross-national Cooperation, Funding and the Ownership of Feminism

The importance to unite and to strive for an including movement continued to be discussed. Sylvie Jacqueline Ndongmo thanked WILPF Sweden for their cooperation, which enabled her meeting with Annie Matundu Mbambi WILPF DRC, and Joy Ada Onyesoh WILPF Nigeria. Through their cross-national cooperation they described how they have been able to share

experiences, learn from each other and by uniting also becoming stronger. Thanks to their exchange they have been able to analyse the situations in their countries and notice that Cameroon unfortunately is on the same road as the DRC was once. Together they emphasised the importance to work preventively and not to wait until a conflict has started. Regarding the development in Cameroon and the need to act right away in order to prevent a catastrophe, Sylvie Jacqueline Ndongmo quoted Annie Matundu Mbambi:

We need to raise the umbrella before the rain starts to fall.

- Annie Matundu Mbambi

The need to continue the cooperation within the region was noted at several times during the session and Annie Matundu Mbambi announced her wish for a WILPF Kinshasa to be established. However, in order to expand WILPF with new sister sections in Africa, they emphasised that need of financial assistance from WILPF. A part of the preventive work has been to engage people to care about one another and to engage men and boys into their peace work. Joy Ada Onyesoh described how she has reached out to the government to show that they are not a threat, and Sylvie Jacqueline Ndongmo described WILPF Cameroon's work where men and women have been invited to hear more about their work. She also described how it not always is possible to speak as one may do in the west, and how they often have to adjust their choice of words and tactics. For example she explained that the word "feminism" can not always be used in the region and stressed that the concept is not formed and owned by the west but can be formed into whatever version suites each region.

The Challenges of Militarisation

At the session "Root Causes; Power, War & Weapons" Cynthia Enloe, demilitarisation and feminist specialist, spoke about how the patriarchal systems have created the myth of men as the protectors of women. Dean Peacock emphasised that these systems have ordered both men and women into oppressing and painful categories within the hierarchy staircase, and that we therefor all need to work against it. He then spoke of how we can see its results in the society, such as in how it affects men in social relations and health care, and how homophobia often is used to keep men within these frames.

State budgets and Drones

During the plenary session “Military Versus Social Spending” Emma Bjertén-Günther, Research Assistant from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute in Sweden, held a worrying but important presentation regarding the world’s military expenditures. Amongst others she presented that the world’s military expenditure were 1,776 billion US dollars in 2014 and that the U.S. alone stood for 34 % of this number. During the first plenary session on April the 27th, Jody Williams from the US, a Nobel Peace Laureate and a leader in the campaign to ban landmines and co-founder of the Nobel Women’s Initiative, held an entertaining and inspiring speech with focus on war, unmanned aerial vehicles, extrajudicial killings and killer robots.

Since the attacks of 9/11, the drone strikes in Pakistan have killed 50 000 people

-Sameena Nazir

Sameena Nazir then raised women’s participation in political decision-making and declared the current situation as unacceptable. Jody William also stressed for the need for women’s empowerment and continuously repeated “Nothing about us without us!” reminding us that the 50 percent of the world’s population should always have their say.

During the session “Military Versus Social Spending”, María Muñoz Maraver, Human Rights Programme Director at WILPF, highlighted our governments’ crooked concept of security. She criticised them as they instead of investing in human security with i.e lightening in the streets and functioning judicial systems, they invest in the weapons that actually threaten us. On the first plenary session on April the 27th, WILPF’s Secretary General Madeleine Rees emphasised that the world’s yearly expenditure on arms would be enough to resolve poverty and supply the world’s population with clean water. While we possess the tools, the failing systems stop us from resolving the issue, she declared. However we cannot wait a hundred years before we have accomplished peace, she stressed. Our main challenge hence appears to lay in how to change this destructive system. María Muñoz Maraver emphasised that democracy, transparency and inclusion are crucial ingredients in order to achieve human security. In relation to our countries prioritizing of their state budgets, the production of weapons is often defended with the job openings it creates. In the plenary session “Root Causes; Power, War & Weapons” Laura Boillot, Project Manager at Article 36 and disarmament activist, countered such reasoning with the sharp question:

If we are looking for job opportunities - Why not make school buses instead of weapons?

-Laura Boillot

During the manifestation “We Get What We Pay For”, the participants were able to reorder the world’s military budget and reallocate resources to education, health and poverty prevention. At the end of the manifestation, the table for military expenditures did not have a penny left, while the three others were flooding with support. The manifestation showed how twisted the world’s current expenditures are and how it ought to look like if true reasoning and care for human security governed.

Financial and strategic interests

During the first plenary session on April the 27th, Madeleine Rees spoke of the financial and strategic interests that may influence states actions in terms of arms and policies. She raised the decision by the Swedish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Margot Wallström, not to renew the military memorandum of understanding with Saudi Arabia as a converse case. The effects of financial interests on human rights, policies and environment were raised continuously. In the session “Transnational Companies and Human Rights” we were offered a wide and profound presentation of the challenges with these massive companies and their industries, exemplified with several cases from Latin America. Moderator Ana María Suárez Franco began by clarifying that transnational companies’ (TNC) violations of human rights and exploitation of the nature is no new phenomenon but continues to be denied by the companies home countries. Some examples of industries mentioned during the session were mining, hydroelectric, expansive agricultural (mono-cropping) and service companies.

Lina Solano Ortiz, from Frente de Mujeres Defensoras de la Pachamama, incorporated a long-term perspective in her presentation and offered us an extensive description in which she distinguished the mining industry’s socio-economic and environmental impacts. By following its chain reaction, Lina Solano Ortiz showed how the industry not only pose a direct danger to the men working in the mines but due to the environmental damage also damage those living in the surroundings. As men often have to migrate to the mining areas for work, Lina Solano Ortiz described how families are shattered and how women often are left alone to provide and care for the rest of the family. As the men become sick from working in the mines, the women will also have to care for them and the whole family will then stand without a livelihood.

Another issue raised in relation to these industries was the eviction of landowners. As women often provide for whole families through small and medium farming, these evictions have a devastating affect on the families and the societies in large. While the surrounding nature becomes polluted, self-provision through farming becomes impossible and give them no other choice than to turn to the same industries for work. In addition, old agricultural techniques are forgotten. Lina Solano Ortiz also described the remaining issues when the industries have left, as they leave unemployed inhabitants and a damaged nature impossible to farm. In addition to the industry's exploitation of the nature and workers, women and young girls are being exploited for prostitution and cheap labour in societies that have sprung up in connection to these industries. She described her meeting with girls no older than 10-12 years old working 16 hour shifts in some of these bars.

Sandra Elizabeth Xinico Batz from RCE-Guatemala informed us about how the Mayas, making up 65 percent of the population, consistently are being discriminated and exposed to violence in Guatemala. With Sandra Elizabeth Xinico Batz's presentation we got to learn more about the Mayan culture and she explained the groups' resistance to these industries due to the culture's fundamental differences to capitalism. She described how the governments or/and companies have hired police, military and other groups to fight down the resistance, using threats and violence, including sexual violence. Sandra Elizabeth Xinico Batz declared that more than 200.000 persons have been murdered or reported missing and testified about how journalists and activists in this very moment are being imprisoned. Luis Espinosa Salas, deputy for María Fernanda Espinosa, the Permanent Representative of Ecuador to the United Nations, spoke of TNC's financial pre-conditions and their capacity to run over weaker states. He emphasised the need for institutional limitations to protect the rights of the people rather than the companies and their financial interests. However, in the end of the session he showed ambiguity in his stand as he also expressed the need to cooperate with these TNC's in order to create jobs. Several of the participants spoke of the importance of judicial limitations against TNC's but also emphasised that this alone is not sufficient to bring about a change. The case of Ecuador was raised, as an example of how judicial restrictions towards TNC's are useless for as long as they are not put into practise.

The session offered the participants an extensive and profound description of the issues with TNC's and the exploiting industries but also took the time to look to solutions. The participants in the panel spoke of the challenges in terms of how we can abolish the TNC's

current exploitation of nature and workers and how to prevent new exploiting industries from being established. Anne van Schaik from Friends of the Earth Europe explained how we continue to see the same companies in the same type of cases and stressed the need for trials against the TNC's violations of human rights. She took the tribunal in Canada 2014 as one example but also reminded us that it unfortunately was more of an exception rather than a common phenomenon. Anne van Schaik also highlighted the difficulties to control and restrict TNC's as they, by changing name or by using a daughter company, can continue although they have been blacklisted. Moderate hope was shown to the UN resolution on human rights and transnational corporations presented by the Treaty Alliance. The resolution has received criticism for being too narrow, as it covers transnational corporations but omits national or other businesses, and face opposition from the EU and the US. However, despite this, it received several hopeful manifestations. Anne van Schaik was hopeful and emphasised the number of countries that have voted in favour of the resolution and argued that we despite the remaining challenges ought to value this progress as a step in the right direction.

Empowerment of Women and Attention in the Media

The need to work with the empowerment of women and for women to receive attention within the media was also raised during the conference. During the first plenary session on April the 27th, moderator Amy Goodman, journalist from "Democracy Now!", spoke of the role of the media and stressed that we have to continue to demand the word and not let ourselves be silenced. Leymah Gbowee, Nobel Peace Laureate and peace activist from Liberia, spoke of the peace movement's difficulty to gain attention in the Liberian media and how they finally decided to launch a sex strike. Edith Bellantyne, long-standing member of WILPF and former Secretary General and President of WILPF, asked on what base peace should be built. She stressed that we today know that capitalism does not work, and encouraged the participants to organise and to go out on the streets and demonstrate. The need for women's empowerment was discussed during the session "Crossing Borders: Regional and National Strategies to Prevent Conflict in West and Central Africa". Joy Ada Onyesoh, founder and President of WILPF Nigeria, emphasised that women not only need to be seen in power positions but truly participate in the decision-making and political practices. It was inspiring to hear Joy Ada Onyesoh describe the work of WILPF Nigeria, where 300 women were educated as observers for the national election. She also stressed that women's freedom and human rights are not two separate subjects but as much as everything else, have to be implemented together. In the same session Annie Matundu Mbambi, President and founder of

WILPF in the DRC, continued to speak of the empowerment of women and emphasised that many women still are in need to hear about their rights before they dare to participate in politics. Annie Matundu Mbambi also emphasised the need to speak about the sexual violence and shared some of WILPF DRC's local work. She declared that the Administration of Justice support and assistance to survivors has been insufficient and described how WILPF DRC has stepped in to help survivors in the healing process and to bring their cases to court.

Conclusion

The conference offered platforms for dynamic discussions where the participants were able to share their experiences and knowledge. The need to meet and share experiences with like-minded people was evident. By meeting other organisations and sister sections from all around the world, bonds within and outside the organisation were created and strengthened. The conference and anniversary meant many cheerful moments, interesting and illuminating meetings, but it also shed light on the challenges we face as a movement. WILPF's combination of a feminist perspective into the work for peace and disarmament is explicit in the movement's understanding of the relation between the patriarchal systems and the challenges we face. Throughout the conference, some of the challenges addressed were: militarisation and the development of new weapons; the patriarchal systems with i.e. racism, sexism and homophobia; war and conflicts; capitalism and the exploitation of people and the environment. Over time the challenges may change form, but thanks to WILPF's perspective, the movement possess the tools to reveal the consequences of patriarchal systems, the core of violence, and build a long-term and holistic peace. Without denying the challenges we face, we can find strength by acknowledging our accomplishments and the wonderful everyday work of all WILPF sections. The gathering of 1000 people from around the world showed that we truly are a global organisation and that we united can make a change.