

Author: Marlene Tuininga

Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, and Women in Black, Paris.
< marlentuininga@aliceadsl.fr >

WHAT WOMEN IN CONFLICT AREAS COULD TELL THE MEN FROM NATO

An assumption:

The upcoming of important and vocal, if too seldom heard, women's groups all over the world in recent years is something quite new that can change the present paradigms in society. These groups can be considered as the unexpected side effect of some very ugly things in the modern world : wars, forced migration and exile. Knowing that most of the time these upheavals result in women being «liberated» from traditional forms of submission and oppression because their menfolk are either in the army, in prison, doing business elsewhere or dead, women are in the obligation of organizing themselves together. Staying behind or fleeing with their children, they develop unknown qualities and a new solidarity.

I think we may consider the presence of many women's organizations and the existence of this special workshop as a manifestation of this new consciousness which is beginning to spread to the «West». And which, by the way, reconnects us with the intuition of some of the 19th century suffragettes and with Virginia Woolf!

As a journalist I have visited more than twenty countries on four continents and think I can distinguish three special common characteristics of these women's groups: survival, common sense and «fraternity», empathy. I will outline in which way, to me the NATO project is contrary to these traits.

Survival:

In Rwanda, thousands of men, killed or in prison, have been absent from their homes for many years. To sustain themselves and their children, the women became farmers, village-leaders, political leaders etc. It is a common saying that Africa is run by the work of women. But when the men come back from war, prison or exile, they often carry with them a strong «culture of violence» and the women must struggle for their own survival. A woman in Bosnia told me «War is easier for men, they just die, sometimes even as heroes. We women must cope with the burden of survival for years and years.»

Are women in Afghanistan safer now than before because of the NATO intervention? No, they are, with their children, the principal victims of the ongoing bombings, many still can't go to school and they still must wear tchadri's. Do women in Germany and Eastern-European countries feel more secure because of NATO military bases in their areas? No, they know about the risks of prostitution, rape and even murder, which surround the U.S. bases in the Pacific and closer to home..

Common sense:

Women are not only victims and caretakers: they apply good reasoning (or common sense) to what is happening to them. They ask: 'Why, how can this be changed, who wins in this?' Like the 1300 women from supposedly enemy countries who met together in 1915 to create the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom and then went to see their heads of State, pleading to end the war. In 2001, West African women from Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea met together and did the same thing, organizing themselves internationally for peace.

As Cora Weiss, president of the International Peace Bureau, says: «War is stupid.» Is it a proof of common sense to spend 1500 billions of euros on military equipment as was the case for NATO in 2005 and to create a climate of fear, suspicion and insecurity between NATO countries and the others, between the «North» and the «South», the rich and the poor? When we know that a small amount of this sum would be able to put an end to their inequality? And is it reasonable to go on expanding nuclear weapons, capable of destroying all forms of life on earth, as NATO consistently recommends?

Empathy:

In 1998 in Northern Ireland, Catholic and Protestant women who had taken the trouble to cross the borders, and discovered that the «others» were just like them, launched a women's party. Through its participation in the peace negotiations, they managed to get provisions favouring disabled persons and immigrants included in the «Good Friday» peace treaty that the other parties led by men had never thought of. In Asia, several women's peace marches have been organized between Indians and Pakistanis. When Yugoslavia split into several countries and their president started to wage war against his former countrymen, Serbian women, taking their inspiration from their Israeli sisters who demonstrate each week against the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, created their own section of Women in Black with the motto «Not in our name». Today they still struggle against impunity. As for the European countries – which still live in peace – we know that women are the majority in nearly all social and support movements and associations.

Based on a concept of «defense» that seems to include «preemptive war», NATO looks like a scheme concocted by the white man against the rest of the world, presenting an image completely contrary to that of empathy.

Comparing the UN Charter and the NATO treaty

In 1945 the winning parties of World War II united in a magnificent upsurge to bring peace to the world and created the United Nations («We the people»). A telling way to measure the discrepancy between NATO and peace is to compare the Charter which underlies the UN with the fourteen articles of the treaty signed four years later creating the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. A French lawyer by the name of Roland Weyl, member of the International Association of Democratic Lawyers, has tackled this job. The brochure he published distinguishes five reasons sustaining his claim that the NATO treaty and its activities are illegal in terms of international law.

First: Article 52 of the UN charter provides for the creation of «regional alliances» only in order to foster peace. **Second:** as a guarantee for peace, the five permanent members of the Security Council were chosen among countries both from the «North» and the «South». The Atlantic Treaty comprises only the «North». **Third:** the Charter recognizes the right to defence of a country only in the case of a direct armed aggression, not, as NATO has been doing in the Balkans and in Afghanistan, in the case of the menace of aggression. **Fourth:** The Charter states that all nations have the right to political independence. Which means that interfering, as NATO has done, in a country's «interior affairs» is illegal. **Fifth:** Contrary to the possible alliances outlined in the Charter, NATO does not cover a region. Western Europe would be a region, or Central Europe or North America. An area reaching from Rome to San Francisco, with the admittance of Italy, Romania and, possibly, Ukraine, it is not even Atlantic!

In short, NATO exists in complete contradiction to the drive for peace expressed after World War II and which is still alive in nearly all peoples. Even without knowing that the ambition of several of its leaders is to replace the UN, it is also a menace to peace itself: A good reason for all of us, men and women, to resist. And the action of women's groups in conflict areas shows that it can be done!