

Feminist aspects of an anti-NATO peace strategy

Mouna Ghanem is a Syrian woman, she lives in Damascus, although the civil war is causing a climate of violence even in everyday life. It is becoming more insecure and brutal. A couple of months ago Mouna took the initiative gather women for a peace-building process. 44 women from Syria met in November 2012 in Cairo to find out if and how they can cooperate. They came from different Syrian regions, differing political organizations and institutions they were of diverse ethnic and religious origin.

At present unfortunately hardly any political force in Syria follows the diplomatic efforts of Lakhdar Brahimi to solve the conflict by peaceful rather than by military means. Peaceful negotiations have to incorporate all forces involved in the conflict, they have to start talking without preconditions. They must immediately start negotiations for a ceasefire. That – at present – does not function among the conflict-parties in Syria. But it did function among the Syrian women who established a network called “women for peace” – although their political positions ranged from opposition to the support of the Assad regime. They were able to build mutual trust through the creation of a culture of dialogue that respects all opinions and respects the different viewpoints, dedicated to the one goal: Peace!

Mona Ghanem told me that those Syrian women are encouraged by the experiences of other women whose countries have suffered from the difficult consequences of civil war. They considered most important the experiences of women in Liberia. They are also impressed by the experience of the Irish women and in particular by Monica McWilliams who emphasized the role of women as a key factor in the settlement of the Northern Ireland Civil War. A Catholic who cofounded the Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition political party with Protestant Pearl Sager, McWilliams was elected to a seat at the Multi-Party Peace Negotiations which led to the Belfast (Good Friday) Peace Agreement in 1998. Today she is a professor of Women’s Studies at the University of Ulster.

Isn’t it amazing that women from a deeply crises- and war-ridden country like Syria are able to build bridges of understanding and overcome cultural, religious and also deep political differences for the one and only purpose of peace-building? And isn’t it remarkable that these ordinary women study the experiences of women in other countries – although their conditions of political struggles in Syria are so different from the ones - for example - in Liberia or Northern Ireland und although their own living-conditions have become brutal and extremely complicated? The longing for peace appear to be a powerful and awesome force.

In conflicts women very often are the first to develop a common approach. Not because they are by nature more peaceful than men. No, women just are not as deep as men imbued with patriarchal thinking and not as permanently and totally embedded in patriarchal structures. Patriarchal structures are power structures; and women have been excluded from power for centuries.

In the wars of the 20th century up to now women were not only victims, they also took part in the war effort. They took positions in the medical field, or they served on the “Home front”, working for the military industry, or taking responsibility for economic or agricultural matters. Their spouses, sons, and all of the fighting troops offered them a fully supported “home front”. Women worked and assisted with war propaganda.

Maybe you remember Lynndie England, from the German Boulevard-paper *BILD* she was labelled as “Torture-Witch of Abu Ghraib”. The torture methods of “sensory deprivation” were formerly applied at the US-Base Bagram in Kabul and in Guantanamo Bay, but they were anchored into collective memory by the violent acts of a woman – because in my point of view, it revived the deeply rooted image of witches, which embody sexual superiority and evil.

But still war is seen as a men’s affair – he is allegedly a rather violent creature, genetically programmed for the hunt, physically resilient and strong – and peace is seen as a trait for women

– as preserver and guardian of life, and therefore more ready and able to work towards peace. Thus a gender hierarchy of separation and exclusion is constructed. Separation and exclusion portray the classic archetype of the conception of an enemy. The division between “us” and “them” creates the preconditions for the formation of conflicts and war.

Patriarchy ideologically is based on the duality created between men and women. In the male patterned arrangements women are considered the “other”. In war time and its preparations gender contradictions do not disappear, but are instead superimposed by some form of national or ethnic identity, which clearly separates the “us” from “them” and “them” becomes “the others”. Empowered through lies and propaganda, finally “the others” become dehumanized, they lose the attribute of existing as a human being. In some way, this perception leads to the legitimisation of killing, since if the enemy is not perceived as a human being, then, nobody feels guilty killing him.

The duality of men and women, which was created by the patriarchy, entails further divisions from elements such as body – soul, emotion – intellect, private – political, friend – foe, outsider – inhabitant, man – nature. The patriarchal hierarchy ideology operates on an either – or system, which does not allow room for a third option.

Nowadays women serve in several Armies across the world. The USA opened their Army for women after the Vietnam disaster, and Germany did the same after the so-called “humanitarian intervention” in Yugoslavia. The one and the other Army did not only need more soldiers; even more important is that in NATO-countries militarism and war are in danger to loose acceptance in the population. And to integrate women into warfare means to strengthen the spirit of patriarchy and aggression in societies.

War, conflict, and violence are patriarchal at a highest rate. For this reason war and militarisation can only be stopped through feminist visions, created and supported best by both men and women.

The main and universal point of a feminist agenda was already formulated more than 100 years ago by Bertha von Suttner’s call: “Lay Down Your Weapons”. Actually it includes to end all military interventions, to seriously start nuclear disarmament, non-proliferation of weapons and stop of their production, we have to overcome the ideology of war as a political tool and reach the dissolution of NATO and other military organizations; we strive for the empowerment of “The Rule of the Just” instead of “Law of the Jungle”. Within this complex question I just want to offer some reflections on a feminist criticism of NATO and a correspondent road to peace. I would like to point out that not only women but also men should ensure and carry out feminist strategies.

1.

One of the propaganda lies on the US’ and Europe’s new wars is that they are meant to liberate women, to secure women’s rights. But in none of the countries infected by war, the situation of women has really improved, on the contrary: In Iraq and Afghanistan, it has seriously worsened. In Afghanistan every 30 minutes a woman dies in her pregnancy or when she gives birth. Still Afghanistan belongs to the countries of the highest rate of tuberculosis. Every year more than 10 000 people die of tuberculosis, 66 per cent of them are women. The rate of alphabetization stagnates.

Generally the majority of war-victims are civilians, 85 per cent belong to most vulnerable groups of children, women and elderly. Their economic and ecological livelihood is destroyed for decades. In these “new wars”, international law is broken; human rights are violated in an incredible measure. Outlawed and forbidden weapons like depleted uranium, land mines and splinter bombs are broadly used – with incalculable consequences for the coming generations.

The justification of wars by women’s rights is wholly without foundation. The apologists of war misuse women’s rights to maintain or gain power and supremacy – abroad and over the internal

opposition.

I think we must be even more aware to take up the ideological struggle against the abuse of women's and generally human rights for war reasons. Because in most of our countries this is the most important argument to successfully gain the population's approval or at least their tolerance to violence and war.

2.

We all were witnesses of the hopeful "Arab spring". Some of the demands and dreams from then might be gone. Under the NATO-aspect, the "Arab Spring" reveals most notably a change in strategy. In Iraq or Afghanistan, the coalition of the willing or NATO-troops intervened themselves with their own troops, weapons, military structure, logistics. In comparison, Libya marks a turning-point: Since then the US and NATO do not want to intervene themselves but they let others do the bloody and dirty work of military struggle. That is what actually is happening in Syria and Mali does not prove the opposite; because after the French intervention in Mali now very quickly native troops are trained by other armies under the responsibility of EU. In Libya first the existing internal tribal concurrences were deepened from outside, then a call for a no-fly zone came from the Libyan opposition. The US and NATO troops bombed in the interest of warlords and marauding gangs who first barbarically killed Muammar al Ghaddafi and now are terrorising the population. The 40 Billion Dollar profit from the oil-export are lost in the namelessness of private caskets.

Libya also became a turning-point in the East-West-cooperation in the UN Security Council. Russia and China clearly felt that the UN Resolution 1973, which established the no-fly-zone, was abused. The 20 000 air operations against Libya seem to approve the arguments of Russia and China. In the case of Syria China and Russia are blamed to blockade the Security Council. But they just stick to the Geneva Communiqué from June 6th 2012 which insists on a peaceful solution of the conflict and disarmament of all sides involved. Whereas the US- and NATO-States just recognize one single part of the political opposition, the National Coalition of Democratic and Revolutionary Forces that cooperated with the Free Syrian Army and put emphasis on a military victory over Bashar al-Assad. Now first of all Great Britain, but even so the US, loudly think about sending offensive weapons to the Free Syrian Army, whilst NATO already sends armoured vehicles and other so-called "defensive arming".

This "new NATO strategy" to let other do the bloody work of war and civil war requires other weapons. Drones are adequate for this purpose and at the same time drones even more dehumanize and delegitimize military conflicts.

Latest since the Yugoslavian war, the peace-movement is confronted with armed conflicts in which no one of the involved parties is "the good guy". We have to find our autonomous position beyond the conflict parties – while our governments and the mainstream-media betray without restrained the former friends and partners of the NATO-states and allegedly fight for "human rights" hand in hand with dark medieval regimes like Saudi-Arabia or Qatar.

From my point of view we as peace-movement still are in the stage of learning to take an autonomous position beyond the conflict-parties that strictly is bound to non-violence and international law. Maybe the feminist experience of autonomy might help a little here.

3.

We have already learned that the struggle for peace has quite broad implications. One example: To fight terrorism we first and foremost have to fight hunger and poverty. I think that the NATO-strategy itself provides some indications for the content of our struggle. In its strategy NATO indicates certain "risks" against which it builds crush barriers or directs rackets. We can decode the "risks" as writing on the wall for reversal and alternatives.

NATO sees the world climate and thinning ozone layer as a „risk“. It sees the bottlenecking of

international food supplies as a “risk”, and the scarcity of energy and other resources. These dangers are real and they will lead to wars, when we cannot turn round our way of life, of production and distribution. One example: How much wheat and how much corn flow into the gas-tanks, only because we have addicted to the madness of individual transport. And how much wheat, corn, rice is missing in the food-supply of the global south because it has become a source of worldwide speculation. Feminists are protagonists of meaningful and necessary goods that serve for a good life for everyone.

NATO sees poverty, impoverishment, and migration rushes from the south as “risks”. Just now the EU rejects Bulgaria and Romania as participants of Schengen because the fear of poverty-migration. If we do not want to build a wall around Europe or to barricade our cities, we should question our way of life, and see how it can bring us closer to sharing with each other: sharing of resources, energy, sharing of food supplies, knowledge, education, so that we all can live freely and peacefully.

NATO sees new “risks” arising “from serious economic, social and political difficulties. “(Washington, Figure 10). All these “difficulties” affect the poor and NATO responds with its arrogance of power and its wars. Maybe we peacemakers should think about to change the economic, social, and political sphere so that self-determination and equality is offered to the poor.

All these reflections are no illusions but realistic alternatives to NATO. We cannot get peace for less. It was Berta von Suttner who wrote: “What the peace movement wants is not a dream of people withdrawn from earthly concerns, but the instinct of self preservation of our civilization.” Feminists are striving for not more and not less.

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