

# The holistic approach to peacebuilding: From hubris to practicalities

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The UNSC meeting on Women Peace and Security 2011. Photo (c) UN / Eskinder Debebe

Cynthia Cockburn posed a question in her article on 50.50, [Women's power to stop war: Hubris or hope?](#). Her analysis of the different struggles in which women had been engaged prior to their activism seeking to stop World War 1, is a timely reminder that peace is a composite. What those women had been engaged in was ending the excesses of exploitation in various contexts, and demanding specific civil rights. Those rights were not just related to suffrage, but to civil, social and economic justice. Only by achieving them, they argued, would there be the possibility of peace. What Cynthia has done is to underline that peace can only be achieved through a re-conceptualisation of power; understanding better how the elements that create power are interlaced, are interactive and interdependent, and how it is highly gendered. All of which sound a little daunting - but since when did that stop feminist activism!

For almost a century, [Women's International League for Peace and Freedom](#) ( WILPF ) has articulated the need to address the primary causes of war, end militarism, invest in peace, and support multilateralism. Most obviously, WILPF has also argued the necessity of women's participation as fundamental to addressing the political economy of power, and as vital to the prevention and ending of armed conflict. There have of course been some successes, among them the UN Security Council Resolutions on Women, Peace and Security - although what is implemented in practice is far from what was written in these documents. Besides, can we say honestly that we have been able to make the multilateral system actually work to realise the promises of the UN [Charter](#) and the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) ?

In this sequel article, I want to look at what Cynthia set out as being necessary, and seek to describe how we could make this work in practice.

Context is everything. What was [argued](#) in 1915 by the 1136 peace-seeking women who came together from 12 countries, was right. But today there is a new context within which we have to work to address the issues. A deeper analysis of power has led to a greater understanding of the importance of gender and gender relations as a causative factor in determining who has power, and who has not.

This is brought out in the work that has been done by feminists such as [Jacqui True](#) and [Yakin Erturk](#) on the political economy of violence, which, apart from helping us to see how gender determines power in almost all areas of our lives, including in the home, is also extremely useful as a diagnostic. At the risk of generalising, where there is a greater divide in how gender roles are created and assigned, and they are accompanied by emphasis on the stereotype of male /female difference, then there is a greater risk that societies will [use violence](#) as a means of conflict resolution. There is considerable research, including by [Valerie Hudson](#), [Cynthia Enloe](#), and [Carol Cohn](#), which underlines this...obvious though it would seem to those who have ever experienced conflict.

I do not believe that all men are violent. I maintain that men are violent because they are afraid. Afraid of other men, afraid of not being successful, of not being the strong man, the protector, the bread winner, of failing their families. Afraid of having no power at all. Those roles have been constructed, as have the reciprocal roles created for women, so we think we need men to be our protectors / providers. A vicious cycle is perpetuated, which, despite knowing its cost, we continually fail to break.

Sadly, in the Ukraine, we have a living example of how this works in practice, and how the response by the multilateral system has been causative in creating the crisis, and is singularly failing to approach resolution without resort to the time worn rhetorics. The consequences are predictable. No need to look at how the press is reporting what is going on. Suffice it to say there is little truth in most of it, whether Russian or Western. Each has a dog in this fight and is anxious to win supporters to its side ...because there can only be two! ( We know this from Syria and other conflicts). In the meantime, the truth is that when the Maidan Square protests started, the EU and Russia were squaring off to deny Ukraine a choice in its future economic activity, as if Ukraine did not have multiple borders and a need to trade across all of them. Indeed, the right to trade as a nation makes economic sense. Instead, this has become a narrative of 'pro-Russia or pro-West'.

Then look at the gender dimensions of this. First, Ukraine is not the most gender equal of societies. A brief glimpse at the inflight magazines, and the portrayal of women in the media, is sufficient to see there are "issues"- even without deeper analysis. Women were not welcomed as part of the revolution. They were told their roles were back in the kitchen, or cleaning the streets so as to support the revolutionaries. Those revolutionaries became more violent in response to the violence to which they were subjected by the security forces.

Fast forward to post Yanukovich. The European Union and the International Monetary Fund get into agreements with the non-elected transitional government. Neoliberal policies of austerity. Who starts losing jobs, particularly in the civil service and the state-related professions, first? Economics is also gendered. On the streets, the militias continue, and they are armed. The nonviolent men are under increasing [pressure to join](#) as the concept of traditional masculinity kicks in. The narrative deepens, and the "with us or against us" is now dangerously armed and militarized. Women? No one is interested.

The gender analysis coming out of the international organisations monitoring and reporting, including OHCHR, is non-existent at present. They have said that since there is, as yet no sexual violence in this instance, there is no gender dimension. Sadly this is similar to *the* approach to gender adopted by those responsible for investigating human rights abuses - that is to say, it equates gender analysis with investigation into the prevalence of sexual violence. That is insufficient. When conflict is pending or happens, they too revert to the gendered narrative. Reports emanating from these bodies determine, or at least contribute, to the response, as happened in Syria where a similar approach by the Commission of Inquiry does not raise the necessary questions. This has to change.

What *could* have happened is where we could all make a difference. That "holistic, multi-faceted struggle for a nonviolent revolution in the relations of gender, class, ethnicity and nation" that Cynthia [referred](#) to through the lens of supporting the multilateral system in order to get it right.

We have learnt from [Bosnia](#), from Kosovo, from [Syria](#), what happens when the multilateral system

breaks down because it has let things get to the place where national interest overcomes international obligation. The obligation becomes re-interpreted so as to endorse the interest of that member state. Age old, tried and tested, and because of the structures of the system, it prevails.

What if it was done differently? What if, for example, the emphasis was very much on prevention and gender was used as a diagnostic ? This would be fed through the various treaty body mechanisms, and the universal periodic review of the Human Rights Council. What if we monitored arms supplies and access in countries where there are indications of a possible rupture? What if we looked at the foreign policy priorities of states, their trading and financial policies, and analysed these as part of their human rights obligations in their dealings with other states in the multilateral system? Had that been done, the warning signs would have been writ large in Ukraine, in Syria, in Bosnia.

What was and is needed, is the ability to get the analysis of the political economy into the multilateral system, use it to see how the politics of exclusion and economic policies, national and international, are causative of gender discrimination, to understand how that would play out, and ensure that the responses are addressed to defusing the situation rather than antagonising it. It is not complicated. It needs good information from the ground, good analysis and advocacy in the relevant fora, and for states to actually comply with their international obligations. In short, an integrated holistic approach.

Now women in Ukraine are re-grouping from all parts of their country, no matter what language they consider their mother tongue, to try to bring a saner analysis into the public domain. We need their version of reality to be heard in the multilateral fora that have been set up to stop conflict and which are failing. It was the UN itself which blocked the voices of women and civil society in Syria for far too long, and now there is no process at all. It was the multilateral system which created the Dayton agreement for Bosnia and [failed to take into account the gender dimension](#) and the need for inclusivity.

WILPF is committed to a pragmatic approach that challenges and provides an alternative to the compartmentalisation of peace, security, disarmament, justice, development and human rights in the international system. The model we have now, as Bosnia, Syria, and Ukraine exemplify, is distant from the real experiences of the people it is supposed to be serving. It's a narrative which is both dictated and created from existing political, social and cultural norms. It has failed. We must change it.

I remain convinced that we can do this, but only if we consciously and constantly bring all the pieces to the table that are needed to make up the composite that is peace.

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