



Speech by Madeleine Rees,
Secretary General of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom
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Yesterday my daughter Sasha, who is 8, and I went to see the art exhibition/memorial of poppies at the tower of London. It was moving - each one representing a real person, mainly men and some women, who had served in the armed services and died in the world wars.


It reminded me that the Great War of 1914 to 1918 was supposed to be the war to end all wars. It's now 100 years since it started and we have not fulfilled the claim that those who experienced it wanted us to uphold.


As we move towards the end of 2014 the Pope justifiably said that the world is, in fact, in a state of war. Most of it is happening "over there somewhere." But it is happening and it is converging and we are at a crucial moment in history which makes it incumbent upon us to act.

How did we get here? What lessons have we not learnt? The simple answer is that the narrative of conflict that is rooted in structures of power has remained largely intact and whilst we know so much more about how to address this and what we need to do, some of it articulated in the Charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, we have still been unable to achieve it. It's how we can change this that I want to address.

Not known to quite so many but in 2015 there is another centenary, the 100th anniversary of the founding of WILPF. In April of that year, 1,300 women came from all over the world, from belligerent states and the non aligned alike, to try to persuade the warring parties to seek a political solution and to stop the carnage. They had no vote, no legal framework and no international system to support them but they were there passionately advocating for peace. They went on to a congress in Zurich where they formalised the organisation and committed to making known the root cause of war, to challenge militarism and invest in peace, to create and support multilateral institutions dedicated to preventing war and to upholding principles of justice. This included vital principles of non discrimination on any ground, economic and social equality between nations and between peoples.

Pretty progressive – and as valid now as it was then, only now we have far more tools available to us to realise their aims. And that was why I joined. Not many organisations have an analysis which is not just about demanding peace but deconstructing what you have to do in order to achieve it.





In seeking to build on their analysis, modern WILPF has three programmes: Reaching Critical Will, which deals with all things military, from nuclear weapons to the regulation of the arms trade to militarisation. We have Peace Women which works in New York, in particular engaging with the Security Council to ensure the inclusion of gender analysis and adherence to the Women, Peace, and Security agenda. And in Geneva we have Human Rights to bring all of the arguments together in the human rights fora. In all we bring women from grassroots organisations to the elements which make up the international system to bring their truth and their analysis so as to influence discourse and bring change. Bringing all three elements together we also have our conflict response which seeks to engage as early as possible in situations of crisis. More on how later.

To return to our problem. How we have failed to learn lessons and repeat mistakes.

There is a narrative, there is always a narrative, and it is made by us depending on our aims and objectives, our position in the structures of power and of enormous consequence our gender. And to be clear; gender is not just about women as so often it has become. It is not about comparing men and women and demanding equality. We used to think so but we have learnt that at best it leads only to an inclusion, usually marginal, of women, into systems of power which have been causal in conflict without transforming them. A real gender analysis would look at the structures of power, who has it, who owns it, and how it impacts on men and women in all areas of their lives.

If we do this we can better understand how gender and gender relations are causal in creating the narrative of social and cultural interaction which in turn influences how we resolve conflict. This has been identified as being an understanding of the political economy of power and its role in the creation of violence. Put simply, there is a need to look at our structures of power, in the family, (from who owns the house, the land, the tools, the car, who does the paid work, who controls the number of children there will be, and who can exercise physical power, etc), in the economy, in public life and in all areas of security. All of these are interlinked and reinforcing.

If we do all that we can also see that what has been created has depended on our acceptance of specific gendered roles, and there is nothing like a conflict to bring that fully into view.

War is highly gendered and if we were more adept at prevention we would be able to diagnose possible descent into chaos by analysing our political economy. For example, prior to the conflict in the former Yugoslavia there was a healthy representation of women in public office. As war loomed the number was reduced to less than 6%; strong masculine powerful leaders are needed as violence approaches! Conversely, of course, this is exactly what a nation in crisis absolutely does not want!





The current descent into chaos in Ukraine is sadly yet another example of how gender roles are utilised. The first Maidan was dominated by the male revolutionaries who demanded that women support them by bringing food and keeping the streets clean. The women rebelled and did the legal work of documenting who was going into the hospitals to prevent disappearances and arrests, setting up medical support in the square and forming their own Women's Brigade. They forced their way into the revolution to claim their rights, including women's rights. It worked.

Fast forward to the beginning of conflict in the East and the formation of militias. Men with guns occupying public space. The interim government signs an agreement with the IMF and the European Union for 17 billion dollar loans. Austerity measures are conditional. Public sector jobs are lost and most who lose out are women. In a short period of time women go from being part of the revolution to excluded from public and economic life. Not all women, but the space was reducing.

Fast forward again to the increasing conflict in the East. The government needs to mobilise soldiers and has to create a patriotic, heroic narrative to enable that to happen. Men are the warriors, women have to support them. Classic gender roles. The space for non violent men to seek a political solution is reduced and men who refuse to kill fellow Ukrainians are denigrated as cowards or spies. This will get worse as militarisation expands and if there are no ways of avoiding service.


In the meantime women are organising the humanitarian assistance. Seeking to find non violent solutions, but being pressured all the time by the patriotic narrative and the othering of all of those in the east.

As the reporting of sexual violence grows it will soon be a repetition of Bosnia, Kosovo, Syria, Iraq and on and on where the narrative is only about women as victims and men as agents of military solutions.

The truth is very different. In all conflicts women play the vital role of holding families and communities together, who else does when the men are off fighting?

In Syria women led the revolution but were marginalised once the revolutionaries picked up guns and it became war. But they have brokered local peace agreements and have enabled humanitarian assistance to be brought in. They have organised.





Yet in that conflict as in Bosnia, as in Kosovo as in all but 4% of cases the direct participation of women in peace processes is absent. Our narrative is flawed and gendered. Despite Security Council resolutions insisting on women's participation, in prevention and protection, on the inclusion of women in peace processes, on pledges by John Kerry and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office that no peace without women's participation can be considered legitimate, it continues. 75% of agreements fail. This because we talk to the men with the guns, however illegitimate they may be, and we do not talk to those who know what is needed to address the root cause of conflict.

Therein lies our solution, the beginning of our solution. More than ever we seem to be rushing to military solutions to crises. When Libya started to fall, we rushed to bomb but without a plan for what happens next. We did the same in Iraq when the failure of the state built by America led to ISIL and with ISIL more resort to arms. The cycle becomes self-perpetuating. We flood crisis areas with arms, with advisors, spend billions on militarised security and next to nothing on helping ordinary people play a real role. That can only happen if there is consensus built on the basis of international legal obligation. That obligation exists but states pursue their own political agenda regardless unhampered, on the whole, by their domestic population...the war, after all, is still happening somewhere over there.

We have a choice; we either let things continue, and I fear we know where this will end, or we decide actively to engage in getting our governments to change the narrative of confrontation. Crises can only be dealt with, ultimately, through political negotiation, the longer it is left the more difficult it gets, the greater the entrenchment of our dysfunctional narrative and the less likely it is that we can achieve the deep peace that is needed.

Next year, WILPF will be 100 years old and we will be holding a major conference to discuss "Women's Power to Stop War." Not hubris, but a serious debate, discussions and analysis as to how to engage, how to change the narrative so that we can bring the voices of those who are not considered to have power to the metaphorical table. We invite you to come. We want men and women to engage in this push to make this century the one in which we achieve our ultimate goal of deep and real peace.

