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Interview with Madeleine Rees, Secretary General of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom



How does one make sure the end of a war is the beginning of peace? “Make women part of the peace process” is one answer that has been promulgated by the Geneva-based Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) for almost 100 years.

What is the purpose of the WILPF?

Our organization was founded in 1915 to try to stop the First World War. One thousand one hundred and thirty-six women from all over the world crossed borders to meet in The Hague and discuss how to persuade the neutral powers to step in and pressure the belligerent nations to put an end to the killing. It did not work, obviously, but the analysis of the root causes of war these women came up with is something we still hold dear today. Our core aim is to work for peace and freedom by claiming women’s right and responsibility to participate in decision-making on all aspects of peace and security. We try to identify the root causes of armed conflict so that measures can be taken to address them. That includes demilitarization, investing in peace and supporting the multilateral system so that it can be used to prevent conflict.

How has the group's agenda changed over time?

The fundamental principles of our work have remained the same, but our strategy has become much more integrated. We have always worked for disarmament, although naturally our focus expanded with the invention of nuclear weapons. We also look at human rights violations as causes of armed conflict. And we have a programme supporting United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, which aims to ensure the participation of women not just in peace agreements to end conflict but also as a conflict prevention strategy.

It is important for us that these three programmes are closely connected. There is no point in talking about conflict prevention if you do not talk about disarmament, and no point in talking about women's participation without talking about human rights.

We also have a Middle East and North Africa programme, which was launched in response to the Arab Spring. And the other big part of our work is gender analysis.

What is gender analysis and why is it important?

Gender analysis, as opposed to sex discrimination analysis, looks at gender relations and the deconstruction of masculinity as an element of what makes conflict possible. Looking only at male-female ratios is insufficient, and putting more women into positions of power does not necessarily influence the dynamics we are trying to change.

Gender is something that has been talked about a lot, but has been very badly misunderstood. International organizations have focused very much on gender mainstreaming, but as someone from the United Nations has said, we have gender mainstreamed so well we can't even see it anymore.

What we have been looking at is gender relations and the deconstruction of masculinity as an element of what makes conflict possible. It is one of the very big areas of academic research. The basic idea is that violence can arise as a product of gender relations, that in order to understand where violence comes from and how militarization takes place you really have to examine who has power and how this power is exercised.

It all comes down to the way we bring up little boys and girls. When a three-year-old boy falls over, he will be picked up and told to be a little man, whereas when a girl falls over, she will be cuddled and told it's okay. It starts there – toughening up the men in order for them to be the providers.

There is an excellent study commissioned by the United Nations Development Programme (it has not been published, unfortunately) which shows how male psychology works in the build-up to a conflict. Before a conflict, a male will see himself as the protector, the provider, the husband, the father, but as things move on, he will see himself as the warrior, a different sort of protector, with access to women and so on and so forth. So he moves away from the normal role he was playing and develops this violent masculinity. We saw it manifest itself quite horrifically in the Bosnian context with the human trafficking that was happening there.

You have many years of experience as a human rights lawyer in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Can you tell us about WILPF's recent project to arrange a meeting between Syrian and Bosnian women?

We invited 25 women from Syria to Bosnia last February to exchange ideas with women there. Bosnian women have learned some very hard lessons. It started with their exclusion from the preparation of the peace agreement that ended the war in 1995. The Dayton agreement institutionalized the ethnic dimensions of the conflict at the expense of any other analysis.

The result has been a severe reduction of any space for women to be part of the political process, to work together for change. It was evident to us that in the Syrian context women are similarly excluded. We wanted to work with Syrian women to see what could be done to get them involved in peace negotiations before any agreement is reached, so they can influence the process of transition.

I have to say it was one of the most incredible experiences I have had in terms of seeing how much the Bosnian women had learned and achieved in trying to overcome the system, the constitutional framework which has created divisions. That helped the Syrians enormously. They felt solidarity from the Bosnian women, who had lived through the same horrors that they were going through.

The Bosnians were able to encourage the Syrian women by telling them that they are way ahead of where they themselves were three years into their own conflict, because they have had much more support. And also because of the Internet, which makes it much easier to organize and engage. Not that there is access all over Syria, but where there is, it has made communication that much easier.

The Syrians, in turn, were able to nudge the Bosnian women into action with regard to the anti-government protests that were underway in their country at the time. “You should make your voices heard,” they said. Now we are working with the Bosnian women, to recreate the solidarity that they had before, to recreate a dynamic for change.

Do you have plans for marking WILPF's 100th anniversary next year?

We are going to have an enormous celebration in The Hague, the place of our birth. In April, we will have our Triennial Congress, which is the decision-making body of the WILPF, and this will be followed by an international conference where we will collaborate with the Women Nobel Laureates to invite women and men from all over the world to discuss what progress has been made and what must be done to make peace and security a reality.

Maria Kuchma spoke with Madeleine Rees.

Academia and the OSCE



New Mediterranean

The recently-launched New-Med Network unites experts inspired by a common commitment to peace and security in the Mediterranean region and an interest in how the OSCE can move Mediterranean co-operation forward.

Discussions were set in motion at a workshop in Turin on 4 and 5 June, supported by the Compagnia San Paolo of Turin. The international seminar “Towards Helsinki +40: the OSCE, the Global Mediterranean and the Future of Co-operative Security” will be held in Rome on 18 September 2014, sponsored jointly by the Swiss Chairmanship of the OSCE and the Italian Presidency of the European Union.

OSCE Think Tank Network

The OSCE Network of Think Tanks and Academic Institutions published the results of its first study, “Threat Perceptions in the OSCE Area”, in April 2014. A second study on the future of OSCE field operations is underway and will be presented in the autumn. For latest developments visit: osce-network.net.