

Mobilising for peace and freedom: from aspiration to lasting change

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Madeleine Rees

The 2015 WILPF manifesto outlines how those who choose peace over conflict must act, and recognises that negotiations on a treaty making transnational corporations accountable for violation of human rights is part of the way forward.

In 2014, Cynthia Cockburn wrote the first [article](#) in the 12-month lead up to the 100th anniversary of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. She reprised the formation of the organisation reminding us of our history in April 1915:

"More than a thousand women assembled to talk peace. They travelled there from twelve countries, on both sides of the Atlantic and both sides of the conflict, drawn by a belief that women could achieve something male leaders were unwilling or unable to do: stop the carnage. The organisation emerging from the Hague Congress called itself the International Women's Committee for Permanent Peace. A few years on, it would be renamed the [Women's International League for Peace and Freedom](#)."

In her [article](#) on oD 50.50, Cockburn announced WILPF's main strategy to prepare for the centenary: to roll out world-wide mobilisation under the bold headline *Women's Power to Stop War*, and to ask the cogent question "is this a statement a fact, or mere aspiration?"

Now it is August 2015, and the anniversary is over. A congregation of two parts: the [Congress and the Conference](#). The former to devise and approve the WILPF programme for the next three years, the latter to start building anew, a movement for change, an alliance of women and men to realise women's power to stop war. Not unambitious, certainly aspirational, but then again one has to be - given what we are up against.

Over the last 12 months our sections and members from over 40 countries - many in the midst of conflict - discussed and debated the fundamental issues of women, war and peace. At our Congress in April, we adopted a [Manifesto](#) reflecting the culmination of that process.

Manifestos can be tricky things.

There is always the risk that they can become dogmatic, inflexible, and ultimately part of the problem, or too different from what exists - with the risk of being disregarded as idealistic nonsense.

The Manifesto we adopted serves to re-state our purposes as an organisation. To re-visit our history - a history of opposing war, of identifying conflicts' root causes, and of adhering to principles of multilateralism as a means to address these concerns. In our Manifesto, we contextualized the issues and the challenges of today's world and clearly outlined the obstacles to peace:

Militarism as a way of thought, and the militarisation of societies, such that perceived threats are likely to be met with weaponry rather than words;

The capitalist economic system, involving the exploitation of the labour and resources of the many by the few, wantonly harming people and the environment, generating conglomerates of global reach and unaccountable power;

The nation-state system as it is today, involving dominant states, Imperialist projects, inter-state rivalry,

contested borders, and, inside those borders, all too often, failure of democracy, political repression and intolerance of diversity;

Social systems of racist supremacy, cultural domination and religious hierarchy;

Patriarchy, the subordination of women by men, in state, community and family, perpetuated by the social shaping of men and women into contrasted, unequal and limiting gender identities, favouring violent masculinities and compliant femininities.

Environmental destruction and ecocide as both cause and consequence of conflict and possibly the greatest danger we face in the modern world.

All of these obstacles are interlinked and need to be addressed coherently, consciously, and constantly re-appraised, evaluated and monitored so that we - those who choose peace over conflict - can see and understand when and how to engage.

At a conference full of like-minded and inspiring people from 80 countries, it's easy to get swept away by the euphoria of the moment, by the recognition of commonality of purpose and a unified passion for change. But then you have to make it work. Our Manifesto did set out some of the main issues (as summarized above) that have to be addressed, but these were taken further by the conference - not surprisingly given the range of talents, experience, activism, and commitment of the participants.

The main question was and is: how do we implement the Manifesto and the outcomes of the conference? There were some immediate and obvious things identified by the conference:

The first element is to campaign for and demand a UN Secretary General who is appointed justly, and not by some secret negotiating process in the Security Council. The ideal is to appoint a person who will truly respect the charter. Who will be serious about human rights and how to realise them. A long list of attributes is necessary, but someone like Mary Robinson has them and she is not the only one.

A second element is to engage with men to restructure power and to improve our understanding of gender identities.

The third element is to critically analyse what a feminist foreign policy should *really* look like. A policy that combines the talents of the academics, the economists, the lawyers, the environmentalists, and the development experts. A policy that works with the people of a country and uses their input, their information, and their expertise to really implement change, to really make an impact. Let that be a formula for all foreign policy and see what a difference it would make. It would hit all of the issues in our Manifesto, both directly and indirectly. More importantly, it would not leave Margot Walstrom, the Minister for Foreign Affairs in Sweden, as the lone political advocate of a feminist foreign policy. She has opened the door, it behoves us all to follow her through it.

The fourth major issue discussed at the conference was engagement with the United Nations and the multilateral system. Feelings of betrayal surfaced with what they do and how they do it. Words like patriarchy, arrogance, machismo, ineptitude and corruption, were interlaced with a less printable lexicon. The UN is not what it was hoped it would be. The claim was that we must take it back, bring it back to the Charter; engage, on our terms not theirs and on every issue - from development to environment to the women, peace and security agenda - and to be aware that we cannot all do it all. We need to combine, to look at who is doing what and make sure we make the connections.

One of the most obvious answers to how we can achieve these goals can be answered in that old cliché: it starts with ourselves. This time, however, we need to analyse our context; we need to understand where we stand in 2015 and adapt to the changing environment.

I want to give one simple example of how this could work:

In July this year representatives from UN member States gathered in Geneva for a week-long first

session of the intergovernmental working group (IGWG) towards a [Treaty on Transnational Corporations \(TNC\)](#) covering multinational and domestic corporations and other business enterprises, with regards to human rights. This was the start of a series of negotiations, which could lead to a legally binding treaty framing the work of transnational companies and making them accountable for violations of human rights. In some respects, this process implicates the seven points of engagement (as mentioned in the new WILPF Manifesto listed above) and demonstrates the intersectionality of all of the issues while also providing us with a chance to roll out the “how”.

If the ‘how’ part of implementing our Manifesto starts with ourselves (the peace makers, even if not signed up as full members yet) then issue one is knowledge: how many people in the world know that this is happening and what an incredible impact it could have in protecting their rights? Everything from greater food and water security, greater environmental protection, improved working conditions, less exploitation, less discrimination, accountability for violations, adherence to ILO conventions. Environmental responsibility. The list of potential benefit is endless.

Issue two is States response: most governments stayed away in the first round, the EU tried to block the process. Other States such as Russia and Switzerland stated that the [UN Guiding Principles on business and human rights](#) work, and that a treaty would be premature.

Issue three is systemic fault lines: this is the exemplification of what is wrong with a mono-economic culture. The dominating principle is neoliberalism, the extremist form of capitalism that puts profit ahead of law, regulation or - heaven forbid - the well being of people or the environment.

Issue four is the multilateral system: it’s good that the working group has convened, but it’s not so good that the ways in which negotiations occur is to avoid acknowledging the power dynamics. Look at who the sponsoring states are, then at who is in opposition, and put money on who will prevail? The reason for this lies in the first three issues. Keeping people ignorant of what is happening enables governments and states - which have a primary responsibility for protecting human rights - to subvert legal obligations and consequently to protect the neoliberal economic system which can only survive if regulation based on human rights norms are not enforced. The multilateral system reflects this power imbalance and nothing changes.

It does not take genius to see the implications of this for the other issues in our new Manifesto. In particular, the militarisation and consequent arms transfers to ‘protect’ areas where there are natural resources that feed the neoliberal system and hence must be available to the companies who would extract them.

Organising intelligently: communication is key in all issues that are dealt with in the multilateral system. The biggest obstacle is knowledge and the media is crucial. Most people see the big picture as too overwhelming to address. They are either too engaged in their own plight - distracting themselves from that of others - to engage in trying to make change on this or any other issue. In the TNCs there is greater responsibility on the States that are the main opponents to the treaty. These are the industrialised “democracies” where we have access to elected representatives and media - if we choose to use them.

So now revert to the ‘how’. Imagine a system that works: civil society, including trade unions, academic institutions and NGOs (including those which are not usually involved in issues of International corporations or human rights) recognise the link to their issue and engage. There is advocacy and lobbying of elected officials, work on the media to make sure more and more people are aware of what is being done, and being done in their name. We must demand the state actually does what international law (all the human rights conventions, arms trade treaty, the Charter of the UN) demands.

The concept of due diligence is such that states should be regulating the conduct of companies registered in their territories. A treaty would give the state more leverage in controlling the activities of these non-state actors and would therefore facilitate the state meeting its obligations under

international law. At present, there is a plethora of complicated regulations that severely inhibit the states engagement. I personally know of one case where a state was fairly sure that violations of human rights were being perpetrated by a particular transnational extractive company in DRC, and would have wanted to take action, but there were so many sub- contractors that it would have taken 200 lawyers over a year to work through them all, and even then there would have been little hope of attribution, something which is untenable. In these circumstances the power of the TNC becomes greater than that of the State. That cannot be what people want. Unelected, non-transparent, unaccountable bodies can act with impunity. It's not what many TNCs themselves want, as witnessed by those that try to comply with the [UN Guiding Principles on business and human rights](#).

Lawyers need to engage using international human rights law. Academic institutions need to engage using the research already available that violations of social and economic rights when combined with the gendered dynamics of political economy, lead inexorably to conflict.

Changing the position of the powerful states is a function of democracy. It would make the multilateral system closer to its purpose under the UN Charter. By engaging on the issue of the TNC treaty we would all be putting into action the elements of the WILPF Manifesto for the 21st century and proving it can work.

No one ever said this is easy. Mobilising and encouraging people to be engaged in issues they do not see as interesting, in places that are remote, in negotiations which seem interminable and hence irrelevant is not for the faint hearted, but it is what we must do.

Our [conference](#) was full of belief in change, not naïve, not merely aspirational but solid, committed and entirely possible. When women from Syria, Libya, Iraq, DRC, -and of all places Palestine—(you name the place which inspires hand wringing and helplessness and there were women from there showing anything but), embrace that belief, and drive it forward as a way of dealing with their daily experience, then we have something!

Our Manifesto states the what, the how, and the consequence if we make it happen. If we do want sustainable peace then we know what we have to do to get it—the TNC treaty is merely one part of the jigsaw.

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