 

**International Women in Black online conference 2024**

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**Introduction**

Women from 34 countries joined the online international Women in Black conference for six days between August 31st and September 8th2024, including women from: Afghanistan, Armenia, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Canada, Colombia, Denmark, DRC Congo, Germany, Greece, Egypt, Eritrea, Finland, France, India, Israel, Italy, Kenya, Netherlands, Palestine, Rwanda, Serbia, Somalia, South Africa, Spain, Sudan, Sweden, Uganda, United Kingdom, United States, Uruguay, and Zimbabwe.

The conference began with a welcome from Rebecca, one of the team that planned and hosted the conference together with Heena, Liz and Sue - supported by a wonderful International Advisory Group: Rauda Morcos and Nabila Espanioly from Palestine, Lepa Mladenovic from Serbia, Corinne Kumar and Celine Jaya from India, Orly Nathan and Edna Zaretsky from Israel, and Marina Gallego and Clara Mazo from Colombia.

**Session 1: Tribute to Cynthia Cockburn 31.8.24**

**Liz Khan (London):** In 1991 Cynthia and other women formed Women Against War in response to the war that broke out in the former Yugoslavia. This led to the setting up of Women in Black London, part of the world-wide network of women opposing militarism and male violence. Cynthia was an activist, an academic, a songwriter, a photographer and a friend to many of us here today. She travelled the world writing books about women and their work for peace, including:

**From Where We Stand**

Looking at War, women’s activism and a feminist analysis

**Anti Militarism**

Looking at Spain, South Korea, Japan and the United Kingdom experience.

**The Line**

Turkish and Greek Women crossing the border in Cyprus.

**The Space between us**

Negotiating gender and identity in conflict in Ireland, Israel/Palestine and the former Yugoslavia

Cynthia met amazing women during her trips who remained good friends throughout her life, and many of these were in Women in Black groups around the world. In 1991, Cynthia wrote, ‘*In many countries and regions around the world, women are organising in women-only groups and networks to oppose militarism and militarisation, to prevent wars or bring wars to an end, to achieve justice and sustainable peace’.*

Cynthia recognised the continuum between violence in war and violence in the home. She felt strongly that Women in Black needed to share experiences worldwide and strongly advocated for a Women in Black Website, which she was instrumental in getting off the ground.

Cynthia was also instrumental in getting the London Women in Black group to engage in opposing NATO and joined women in Europe demonstrating at various events.

Cynthia was a writer, a banner maker, a song composer but mostly an activist to the very end of her life, including choosing when she would die.

**Sue Finch (UK)**: Thank you to Ana Valdés from Uruguay, who suggested we begin this conference with a tribute to Cynthia Cockburn. Cynthia started writing her book about Women in Black in 2018 but sadly died in 2019; we miss her very much, especially her daughter and granddaughters who have joined us today. By 2019, Cynthia had written five chapters of *Women in Black – Against Violence, for Peace with Justice*. Liz, Rebecca, Heena and I – plus many other Women in Black across the world – finished it. In her introduction to the book, Cynthia wrote:

*‘I have been invited by members of the network to write a history of Women in Black and describe the present reality. The objective of such a book is to further our cause – in brief, to eliminate violence against women and to end militarism and war. We believe that the book will help to make Women in Black to become better known, disseminate its message and attract more adherents. Another objective is to re-state and advance feminist understandings of gender in relation to violence and war.*

*Global military spending (currently just short of* ***three thousand trillion dollars a year****) is steadily growing. Massive national military budgets squander resources that could and should be spent on people’s health and wellbeing. It is urgent to give information about ways of protesting against this and drawing more citizens into activism.*

*Rape, femicide and the social exploitation of women are endemic. Feminist activism to end gendered oppression and violence is urgent and will be strengthened by fostering a greater understanding of the masculinist and patriarchal nature of militarism and war and making better known the scope and extent of current movements for change’.*

Cynthia’s first chapter tells the story of how Women in Black began in Israel in 1988, prompted by the Palestinian intifada, with an appeal to End the Occupation. It evolved into a partnership between Israeli Jewish women and Palestinian women that set in train a movement that spread first to the US, then Italy, on to former Yugoslavia, Spain, Belgium, France, the UK, Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, India, Argentina, Colombia, Uruguay, Canada, Australia, South Africa, Russia and Armenia and more countries now, including Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden…

Standing on the shoulders of Women in Black who developed theories about the relationship between gender and violence, in peace and in war - especially the Women for Peace anthologies written by Women in Black Belgrade - Cynthia developed theories about the causal relationships between gender and militarism, and the continuum of male violence from the home to the military, and back again. These evolved as feminists who became part of Women in Black visited each other across borders and conflicts to find paths for action together towards peace, justice and security.

Underpinning this is the practice of transversal politics, crossing borders and partitions to negotiate the space between us, understand that our differences come from where we stand, and find ways together to end conflicts.

We hope this conference - and the next one in Colombia - will take further steps in the direction of meeting and listening to each other through ever worsening violence and genocide, to move towards more effective feminist action together for peace, human rights and justice.

**Ria Convents (Belgium):** Ever since I met Cynthia in Jerusalem in 1994, I remember her as a very warm friend, and I’ll take all her visions with me.

**Rebecca Johnson (UK):** I remember that Ria came to the Memorial for Cynthia in London in 2020. Cynthia was so giving.

**Josie Cockburn:** Hello, much love to you all, and thank you so much for that really warm tribute to our grandmother, and of course the mother of Claudi, it all means so much to all of us. Our grandmother was a very, very inspiring person and she continues to live on in our hearts, big time.

**Claudi Cockburn:** I also want to say big shout outs to a lot of people – especially Sue – for taking on that book. Those of us who were looking for something for mum to do after she finished her cancer treatment were worried about her, and the suggestion of the Women in Black book was a really good idea. But she ran out of time. So, thank you Sue for getting that finished, and a very, very big effort, and very, very well done.

**Ace Cockburn:** She loved you all so much!

**Lepa Mladenovic (Serbia):** I just want to say thank you, and good morning, it’s wonderful to see you all together, this is amazing, and wow! look what new technology brought us, that we can meet each other like this. I was thinking that there are two things I saw at my first introduction to Cynthia, that she was so passionate about working for peace, it was incredible. On top of the fact that she was older than all of us, she had this energy, and persistence and responsibility, somehow I always connected this with you from the UK, that you take things so seriously, in the most positive way. Greenham Common could have happened only in the UK. You know, if we go down south, we always have to stop to pick up coffee, we are just a little bit different! But she was so dedicated, my first image of her was that energy and dedication, and I think it also shows in that photo where she is laying down on the pavement because she wants to take a photo of the horrible separation wall that divides Israel and Palestine, a symbol of power and segregation. She can do anything just to do that. And the second thing is that whenever we were thinking of going to London and did not know where we could stay, everyone kept saying, you know you can always sleep at Cynthia’s place. It was this reference point, this feminist peace activist for whom sisterhood and solidarity were the main principles, so we could always count on the fact that whatever goes wrong with our plans we could always sleep over at Cynthia’s place. That’s a wonderful feeling you know, to tell the truth I would have that feeling even if I had never been in her place, just to know that you could do that. For many years, I was a hitch-hiker in Europe, so we always had this special map in our heads, to keep the wonderful women in our soul who we could count on, and we knew we could always count on her. Thank you, it’s so wonderful.

**Jenny Engeldow (UK):** I met Cynthia a few times, and she came down to talk to Brighton’s Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom branch, and she was just so impressive. She was wonderful, so inspiring, and many people from the local universities came along to hear her talk. I think she just came over as such a wise woman, so full of vitality, but so wise and considered and all encompassing. Just marvellous, and weren’t we lucky to know her, and have her as such a stimulating part of this movement. I also want to thank you all for preparing this, and building this programme that we’re able to take part in. So, thank you all for that too.

**Rebecca Johnson (UK):** Thank you Jenny, and I want to thank Jenny too, as someone who moved to Brighton a few years ago, thank you enormously for everything you do in Brighton Jenny, you organise so many women’s actions, peace actions. We know her from Greenham and Aldermaston women’s peace camps, there used to be a Women in Black (WiB) Brighton but last year in Autumn after the terrible 7th October attack and then the war on Gaza and shelling, Jenny restarted Brighton WiB, which had not been going for years. And we started to do vigils on Fridays, and I wanted to thank you so much for keeping us connected with a lot of other things. That’s what Cynthia did, it’s what so many Women in Black do for each other, and we’re all part of this amazing network web of activists, I’m so grateful to all of you.

**Corinne Kumar (India):** Hello, I just want to tell Lepa that we too love our coffee! But I also want to tell everybody that we love Sue and Liz for the very moving kind words you said to describe Cynthia. Cynthia was really of her heart and her mind, she had a wonderful way in which she used her heart to think and her mind to feel. She came to us in India, you know, I think Sue you have written up her notes, but we loved her so much in India. She stayed a little while with us, but she came to the Women in Black in India, and we always think of Cynthia with much love. So, Celine and myself and everybody in Vimochana send you many, many thanks, Liz and Sue.

**Rebecca Johnson (UK):** For those of you who might not know Corinne and Celine, long-time activists, they will be speaking about the International Courts of Women against war, for justice, for peace. And they hosted the WiB conference in Bengalaru (Bangalore) in 2015 with also an International Court, which was an incredible experience.

**Leena Eräsaari (Finland):** I just want to say hello. I am from Finland, and we are a very new kind of Women in Black group. We had a vigil today, actually. The reason why we started is that ever since, or even before, the war between Ukraine and Russia started, a huge militaristic turmoil has started here. And as Finland is one of the very few countries, for example, where we have common military service for all males we are nowadays acting as a model for NATO, as we are the ones who have more than 2% of our national product in arms, and now the amount of money spent on arms is getting higher, so this is why we first started to demonstrate and also started this group. We have been all the time an all-female group and we don’t have many young women, most of us are 75 plus like me. Most of us have a history in peace movements, but Women in Black is sort of new for us. I’m very grateful for Sue, who sent me the book, so I have it. That’s how I got involved, and try to get others involved, in the international movement. But I do have one more comment, also, to Cynthia. I didn’t meet her, I only know her books, but my history is in Women’s Studies in Finland, and one of my colleagues specialised in Women and Technology and that was also one of Cynthia’s specialities, and this colleague had also visited Cynthia’s house in London. So, we hear this same story as I heard from others here. Thank you for organising this.

**Claudi Cockburn (UK**): I just wanted to add a comment at the end of this, for all those lovely words, and to thank you for being mum’s gang, she really rated being part of the WiB web, and wider web as well, and something that’s really lovely for me, ‘cause I really miss her, and I miss you lot through her as well, all the activism, all the writing, and the people, the relationships, the travel, the friendships, and bumping into loads of you at the house. And something that’s really nice, that happened when I was sorting out mum’s email, phone, all that stuff, I’ve somehow inherited all of you. So, every time I’m looking for someone – like Ria – you’ll be there. Thank you for being mum’s gang.

**Josie Cockburn (UK**): We’re definitely proud to be part of the Women in Black community!

**Session 2: The War on Gaza and Palestine: Palestinian Women Speak Out, 31.8.24**

**Facilitator:** **Rauda Morcos, Palestinian Activist and Human Rights Lawyer, The Legal Coordinator of Human Rights Defenders Fund.**

**Speakers: Riham Nasra, Palestinian Human Rights Lawyer**

**Nabila Espanioly, Palestinian Feminist leader and Activist**

Rauda started by thanking Haifa Siam, a freelance translator in Arabic and English working in the field of human rights and media, for interpreting. Haifa also manages and coordinates projects with local and foreign institutions, including the Palestinian Information Centre for Human Rights, the American Consulate, and the European Union (thanks also to the Maypole Fund for supporting the Arabic interpretation). Rauda introduced and thanked the Palestinian speakers:

**Riham** **Nasra (Palestine):** I was born in 1990 in North Galilee, close to the border with Lebanon. Long before then, the genocidal displacement war had been ongoing. My presentation addresses how the law is being used. The colonisation started with the confiscation of Palestinian properties, preventing families from having any rights, then displacement, occupation and genocide.

Testimonies reveal that there has been a policy directed against Palestinians in Gaza, the West Bank, and inside the Green Line before and after October 7. Since then, many hundreds have been arrested without charge for prisoner/hostage exchanges. Many prisoners have died in prison. All human rights are ignored under the policy of Administrative Detention. Diverse legal instruments affect all Palestinians, and charges are confidential so even those arrested and their legal representatives can’t see the charges under the Illegal Combatants Act.

Thousands have been arrested indefinitely – many families don’t know where their sons and daughters and other family members are – there is no communication. Even when asked by lawyers the government says No Information Available. Or that they are alive when they have died – or vice versa.

There are thousands of detainees who have nothing to do with the war. Even the legal representatives of Palestinian people are held in solitary confinement, and torture is widespread. After October 7 it became clearer that Palestinians have no rights, even the so-called ‘Palestinian citizens’ of Israel. The aim is to intimidate the Israeli public, and to stop protest against what is happening in Gaza. The Communist Party offices have been closed. Films are shut down (eg ‘Jenin’).

Over 9500 Palestinian prisoners are in Israeli jails without access to medicines or clinics, subsisting on tiny amounts of food (one small piece of bread a day) and with only one piece of clothing allowed. I can’t even explain to you the difficult conditions prisoners are living under. Many are suffering from scabies etc. Most are subject to indefinite detention, without charges or trial. Even people attending a funeral can be arrested for supporting terrorism. It is a policy of deterrence. I don’t have any optimism.

Sexual violence by Israeli soldiers against Palestinian prisoners is being revealed and exposed – voices have been raised for an international fact-finding investigation.

**Rauda Morcos (Palestine)**: This is the pain we have been feeling since the colonisation of Palestine.

Introducing Nabila, Rauda said: Nabila is on countless boards and part of many organisations, and also writes children’s stories about Palestinian villages that used to exist before the Occupation. One thing she says is ‘I wish children wouldn’t die but be raised to heaven temporarily. When they come back, they are asked ‘where were you?’ and they answer ‘We were playing with the stars’.

**Nabila Espanioly (Palestine):**  When we began Women in Black (WiB) since 1987, we were inspired by the women of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina who were looking for their children who disappeared under the Dictatorship. It began in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and Haifa. I was invited to join the group in Haifa. When we initiated WiB it was with the belief that we can’t live under or with Occupation. We know it didn’t begin with October 7; it began before 1948.

In 2018 I began writing children’s books as a way of introducing what happened in villages that existed before 1948 (540 were destroyed). We hope that they will soon be translated into German and English. I ask myself, who will write the stories of today’s victims?

As feminists, the personal is political – we understood this from our lives. Before we were introduced to these words, and to intersectionality, we were practising it. Taking back the night, as well as the day, the streets, the power. We need to take back our lives.

It didn’t begin on October 7. Most of the Israeli public don’t know what is happening in Gaza. We need to invent a new language so we can continue resistance – singing, dancing, learning is all resistance. Resistance has to be everything, because we are not divided. There is no symmetry in the killing or suffering. Although it is also personal, suffering is a tool for continuation of control. In the only ‘democracy’ in the Middle East!

The hegemony after October 7 has been very strong, and silences opposition to the government. We can reach more than ourselves by writing and resisting, demonstrating, going out on the streets. Writing is a tool for resistance – we have to have a clear message: it is not about 7 October, it is about the right of a people to self-determination. As feminists we understand and respect that people are searching for self-determination. Who else can see intersectionality if not feminist women? We create our understanding out of living. I’m learning a lot from the Palestinian children and women - even when they are waiting three hours to go to the bathroom - about the resilience of resistance. All this is happening in the context of the dehumanisation and demonisation and segregation of Palestinians.

People are imprisoned for not adding that Hamas is a terrorist organisation if they mention Hamas in Israel. Most Palestinian prisoners have no trial. We used to go out on the streets to protest – now we are arrested. We just have our voices. Today we can voice for the voiceless. Each sentence needs a whole session to be understood. Resistance to colonialism is attacked daily – including Jewish activists who resist the hegemony. Many voices have been silenced. Some Israeli soldiers refuse to serve. It is not about October 7, it’s about the end of Occupation, and self-determination for Palestinians.

**Rauda Morcos (Palestine)**: We are living in a different world, not a legal one. I hear testimonies that are unbearable – they are nightmares that I hear on the hotline I offer for legal support. An even higher number of Palestinians have been displaced in the West Bank since October 7. We ask you to stop your governments collaborating, including those living in Israel.

**Session 3:** **African women’s heritage of peace, history of South African politics including liberation, Palestine, genocide and ecocide 31.8.24**

**Speaker: Yvette Abrahams (South Africa)**

**Yvette Abrahams (SA):** We come from a deep history of mocking oppression and relentless good humour, which comes from surviving genocide in South Africa.

Once the International Court of Justice (ICJ) came out with their judgement, I thought this would soon be over (*The ICJ ruled that Israel’s occupation of the West Bank, Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem is illegal in its entirety on July 19, 2024, and mandated that Israel end its occupation, dismantle its settlements, and provide reparations to Palestinian victims. The ICJ also ruled that Israel’s legislation and measures violate the international prohibition on racial segregation and apartheid.)* Then I saw that there is a genocide unfolding before my eyes in Gaza. So I started my *10 ways to survive genocide* training manual! (available on facebook).

I’m a farmer and campaigner. Elements that changed me: Black majority rule in 1990. Namibia and Palestine both became UN mandates in 1948. . . so Namibians are automatically pro-Palestinian. My parents were on the run since 1963, when I was six months old. We ended up in Sweden as stateless refugees. I’d been un-childed long before that. Our liberation struggle was forced to make peace – the African National Congress (ANC) had no choice.

Everyone concluded that Israel cannot win - an occupying power cannot win against guerilla warfare - so South Africa took it to the ICJ. All the parties are going to have to find a way to reach a political solution. Truly Nelson Mandela’s principle: bring everyone to the table. What happens in Gaza violates all of us.

We accomplished a political settlement but not an economic one in South Africa: 25% of the population still lives in tin shacks. We displaced the conflict from one kind to another. But external support and Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions brought the South African government to its knees. The sports boycott really worked! That and the armed struggle . .

The 1967 borders are illegal – so Israel does not have the right to fire a single bullet. I don’t condemn Hamas – as Mbeki said, as long as there is oppression, there will be resistance. Sometimes there’s necessary violence, but there’s no good violence, and I’m a pacifist.

People living in Israel have no access to news, it’s a highly totalitarian system, identical in intolerance to dissent under fascism.

We are survivors of genocide in many different ways. My father was born in South Africa, and the English killed 80% of his people. My mother was born in Namibia, where 90% of her people were killed by Germans practising for fascism. Her father died in a concentration camp. One of the customs that arose at that time was that we suspended mourning. It was a literal impossibility. When 80% of you are dead, and only 20% are left to bury, and of those 20% most of you are children, you die in a certain order, you pile bodies as the young men, then the older men, the transgenders and last of all the children. So, I feel under normal circumstances I would be condoling with our Palestinian and our Israeli comrades and sisters, but I don’t condone during a genocide, and that’s unfortunately still my custom. Hoping, like our Palestinian comrades, that there won’t be another genocide, and they will be able to go back to the very old traditions. And just to quote my mother who said, ‘Well, when you crawl out from the bottom of that pile of bodies, the one thing you’re not is depressed. You’re many things, but mainly you’re actually hugely optimistic, because you go – thank God, I’m not dead like 80% of my relatives, but I’m not’. And then I guess that’s the most profound thing about surviving genocide is in an ideological sense, in a spiritual sense, it’s very simple. It’s basically, ‘so I’m going to outlive you bastards’. And we’ve devoted ourselves to that ever since 1905. And here I am, still crazy after all those years, and still have a life that’s about very little else.

So, I guess the subtheme for my talk would be lineages of resistance, generations of revolution, and how you generate that after genocide. But one of the things is relentless optimism. Some people might think we’re a little bit insensitive, but you know when you’re lined up in front of a firing squad, all you got left is your voice. You know pretty much the last thing you might be able to do is to mock your oppressors, so we have a deep, deep, deep tradition of mocking. You die mocking the powers of oppression and if I can do nothing else but laugh at them well hell, it’s my revolutionary duty to laugh. So please don’t read my absence of condolences or my relentless good humour as anything other, I think, than genocide survivor skills.

When it came to this particular genocide, which I think up until maybe January I actually thought would be over quickly, I don’t know how many other people felt that way. But you know one thing, once the ICJ came up with the judgement of plausible genocide, I thought ‘well, that’s it, this is over.’ I did write a Facebook post in mid- November pleading with the Israelis that haven’t they had enough yet, and ascribing things they were doing to post-traumatic stress disorder and repetition compulsion and all kinds of stuff. And about a month later lost my job at the University, which had the paradoxical effect that then when in January I came to the realisation that OK, this is it, the real thing, a genocide in progress in front of my very eyes there was nothing to stop me from doing what I wanted to do. So, from the 1st of March I did a Facebook platform. My feeling was, we’ve all got to do what we can do, and what can I do? I can be a role model for how to survive genocide, - I mean, if there’s one thing I know! - and I started my 10 ways to survive genocide training manual. With this training manual we’d written up a whole collective project proposal that was going to involve multiple researchers in multiple countries for about three years tracking colonialism through Africa, after which we were going to write books. And after that I was going to do the training manual. But history ordained it in such a way that I had to do the training manual first because of the struggle and the revolutionary necessity for there to be a training manual. I keep daily notes that I will one day write up, with some universities to hire me again, write up as the book, but that’ll probably be next year.

But that’s who I am, and why I fit in, and what I thought I would do with this talk is I would talk about, as I’m sitting here and planning this Facebook campaign, I should just mention that I’m a farmer and live very far away from town, and before I started I had just finished a two year campaign against Amazon who want to build their African Headquarters on a piece of indigenous sacred land, and during that time I found myself under 24 hour digital surveillance. I didn’t feel safe, I sent away my sister, my nephew, who were living with me. So, I didn’t think I should do a lot of physical resistance, I thought to myself ‘Make yourself very, very easy to protect’. And particularly with the history that we have in South Africa of infiltrators and agents provocateurs, because of the way seemingly healthy liberation movements can just disintegrate into a culture of blame and self-blame and jealousy I thought no, just let me stay at home and work online. I think I’ve actually only been to one physical meeting. I have some plans when we get to the reconstruction work, then I’ll be more of a material presence. But up till now, literally, it’s just been that daily Facebook post.

What guided me was thinking around the elements that made South African, and maybe to some extent Namibian, transition possible. A few years earlier in Namibia where they began their first settlements in ’78 and settled for Black Majority Rule in 1990. South Africa didn’t begin to negotiate until 1989, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and completed by 1994. So, you know, they always say that when Namibia sneezes, South Africa has flu, and that’s because Namibia tends to be a little bit beforehand.

A lot of people said why 2024, like where do you come from? How do you suddenly build a platform on Gaza? I said, well, maybe most people don’t know but Namibia and Palestine have a very long history of solidarity and fellowship. Dating back to 1948 when they both became UN Mandates, and worked together, starting from 1956, mediated through the Anglican priest Michael Scott, thank you very much. Whatever Namibians had the possibility to leave the country for work or studies would sooner or later find their way to Geneva to make a submission about Namibia’s status as a UN Mandate. And in those waiting halls and corridors, while they were sitting waiting to talk to the rich and powerful, would be Palestinians. And so that’s the beginning of our early solidarity, simply as UN Mandates, which is a little like being Cinderella, you know, there’s the stepsisters: apartheid South Africa and apartheid Israel. It never occurred to me that anybody would not know that as a Namibian I’m automatically pro-Palestine. It never occurred to me that was something I needed to make a public statement about, because to me it was rather obvious.

I think a lot about ideas around un-childing, because I became un-childed at a very young age. My parents were in the armed struggle, they had to go on the run when I was six months old in 1963. So, from that moment on I’ve had very fractured relationships with childhood. Again, at the age of two and a half, and again at the age of six years old when I ended up in Sweden as a stateless refugee with my parents and two brothers. Sweden in the 1970s was, because of their refugee policy, a place where you met everybody, you met Chileans who ran away from the Dictator, you met Cubans to the left of Castro, you met Russians to the left of the Bolshevik party. You met African Americans and native Americans on the run from the FBI. It was a place where you met every single political minority dissident in the world, Kurds – you name it. So of course we met a lot of Palestinians. And I remember especially ’76, I was 12 years old, I’d probably been un-childed long before that, but the age of 12 was sort of my political awakening, as a political adult, because in the same year we had the Soweto uprising in South Africa. I’ve never thought any other way but that, as Nelson Mandela said, ‘Our freedom is bound up with the freedom of Palestinians.’

I wasn’t called to do much before this, because of the worry about the use of the term ‘genocide’, it has quite a specific meaning. But the slow ongoing murdering of Palestine and Palestinians for 76 years is still distinct from this that we’re seeing now which, with the ICJ, is a genocide. And I speak in terms of the experiential knowledge, it feels like a genocide – and who should know but us, right? So, the principles I used in building this Facebook platform were very much the principles laid down by Nelson Mandela during the course of negotiations from ’89 onwards. The situations were a little bit different in that our liberation movement was forced to make peace. They were forced to make peace by the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of Glasnost, in that the Soviet Union had been one of the biggest funders of the ANC (African National Congress) and just stopped supporting them after the collapse of the Soviet Union, very similar to what happened to Cuba, for instance, with the famine and so on. So the ANC had no choice but to come to the table. Some sponsors like Libya carried on, China was doing a lot of support for the Pan African Congress, and ZANLA, the armed wing of the Black Consciousness movement, but we had to make peace, there was no other option.

I think the similarity with Gaza and Palestine shouldn’t be overdrawn, in the sense that everybody - including the US military - conceded that Israel cannot win this war militarily. There has to be a political solution, and that’s one conclusion repeated ad infinitum by our former Foreign Minister Natalie Pando, who took the genocide case to the ICJ and advised former president Thabo Mbeki, both very, very experienced veteran liberation movement heroes and politicians. So people knew from the start that this game is not about a military solution, because there isn’t one. As has been shown in every guerrilla war since Vietnam, an occupying power simply cannot win against guerrilla warfare when that warfare is embedded in the population, as Mao Tse Tung used to say ‘A guerrilla among the people must be like a fish in water’ and when that situation occurs, it really doesn’t matter how much firepower you throw at it, we see this now demonstrated before our very eyes, in real time.

In the same way, all the parties are going to have to find their way to a political solution. It was with that in mind that I constructed my platform. And you know, the first thing Mandela said was ‘Everybody has got to come to the table.’ So, I’d make a point of bringing anti-Zionist Jews, I should mention both my parents, who were guerrillas, were also adherents of Trotsky, so I grew up from very young with this you know progressive Jews fighting for social justice, and that was only 1976. But I really became aware that there were other kind of Jews because then the term Zionist was clicked into my 12-year-old consciousness. And fortunately, there’s still many progressive Jews around, so that for me it was always important to say, ‘there is another way of being Jewish’. There’s another way of being a warrior. Palestinian voices, of course, other voices from the Middle East, and trying as much as I can to bring in women, Palestinian women, other women, and queers, so that it’s truly a conversation. But all of this was truly Mandela’s principle. I mean we spent the early years of the 1990s sitting around with people who had been killing us a couple of years before, torturing us.

Before I carry on, just to make a note about exemplary violence. In South Africa we very much had this syndrome, they would beat somebody up in the cell next door, or rape somebody in the cell next door, and part of the reason why they would do that wasn’t just to torture that prisoner. I only use Facebook, but I think there are people that put videos on other media like X, and they do that to intimidate you. That’s the notion of exemplary violence, and so in the same way I think that what is going on in Gaza is in a sense violating all of us. And I want to validate that sense of violation, that there’s no way that can be done to a Palestinian and not be done to me in a very, very visceral sense. One of the things it has done is triggered all my racial memories, my epigenetic memories of the genocide. I had to literally relive our own genocide in order to say, ‘Well what are the Israelis going to do next week?’ I’ve been tracking the lineage of genocide that’s very physical, like the Germans in Namibia who committed genocide in Berlin, and you know what happened to all those Nazis, because apparently most of them didn’t end up in Nuremberg or in South America? It appears that a good deal may have stayed in the German Government. So there’s a particular trajectory – Rwanda, also a victim of German colonialism, is the only other genocide related in that particular family tree. And I’m really sorry to talk about family trees of genocide, but this is what I do for a living.

Bringing everybody to the table is important. And in order to bring everybody to the table, I just want to talk, I think, about the two or three other factors that were important in bringing a relatively peaceful, negotiated settlement. I say relatively peaceful, because let me admit our losses from the beginning. The one big thing we didn’t do – we did political transformation, we accomplished Black majority rule – but we didn’t have the strength or power to do economic transformation, so the land remained undistributed. And here in the Cape, since 1685. So old injustices were not rectified in 1994. One of the things this has meant is that 25% of the population still live in tin shacks. Violence against women is huge. Alcoholism is huge, all the ills of poverty. I don’t even really want to talk about South Africa as a post conflict society 50 years later. We displaced the conflict from one kind of violence to another. And at the time I was very against it, I was part of the radical wing of the Black Consciousness movement, it was resolutely against a settlement, and we could do that because simply nobody ever funded us from outside. We started poor, and we stayed poor. But I could kind of see where the other liberation movements were coming from, and I said ‘well, if the ANC wants to govern, then let them rule’. There was that level of peace in the liberation movement. The first time I voted was in 2005, when President Zuma was moving into power. I’ll talk more about that when we have our session on nuclear power.

Then I realised what a fragile thing democracy is, and how important it is, and really how bad apartheid was. And for the first time I voted, and then I took a job defending the South African Constitution. But you can see how long it took me, over 11 years to reconcile myself to this settlement, precisely because it was a political and not an economic one. So those were the factors pushing our side to a negotiated settlement. The factors that were pushing the National Party Government, I think, in order of importance were the mass protests from about 1985, 86, the first and second states of emergency. Neville Alexander who wrote that famous book *Sow the Wind*, a collection of papers he gave throughout those years, called for mass protests and civil disobedience. The idea was one that goes back in South African politics to the 1950s, namely ‘let them fill the jails’. The manufacture of consent is critical to any oppressive regime, to any warlike system. And you know Steve Biko, and the Black Consciousness movement we did a lot of work around ‘In what way do we consent? Even if it's for the crime of not standing up and being counted?’. There were years of mass protests from ’83 right through until late ’92 in fact, until there was a settlement on the table, that was very important, Trade Unions refusing to work, children refusing to go to school, literally a society that could not function. And again, climate change strikes me as very similar. You know it’s easy when there’s an enemy, and you’re the good one. But when you buy a plastic cup, there’s a sense in which we are all complicit. Where’s that line, and how do we draw it? In the early 80s in South Africa we were not drawing that line any more, we were just not collaborating.

The second very important factor was of course external support, and Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions, because that eventually brought the South African government to its knees, the economic warfare. And strangely enough, I have to mention this because it sounds so insane, but the sports boycott really cut them to the heart. The fact that they couldn’t go play soccer with the other white people really broke them. It sounds insane, but you have to understand who you are dealing with. Barbeque and beer and sport, it’s very cultural. And when they were excluded from sport, it broke their heart, so that played a much bigger role in forcing them to the negotiating table than you can possibly imagine. It was crazy.

Then last, but not least, the armed struggle. And I want to say that I’m firmly of the opinion, I understand that this is in line with international law, that nothing that Hamas does in the territory of Gaza, 1967 borders, is illegal. It cannot be illegal because they are defending their own territory, and the illegality here - to the extent that the law ever matters – but just in terms of how it should guide the language that we use, is that Israel does not have the right to fire a single bullet outside of 1967 borders. It never had. That what we are seeing is a complete breakdown of international law and legal systems doesn’t mean that we should forget that there is a system of international law. And this is what the system says. I mean we need to at least uphold the morality of what that law is trying to codify, and what that law is trying to codify is that colonialism is not legal. Whether it ever has been in international law is another question, but it’s certainly not legal now.

So, I don’t in any sense condemn Hamas. As Thabo Mbeki put it, ‘When there’s oppression, there will be resistance’. And Palestinians are just like us, as long as there is oppression, they’re going to rise up. Myself, as a pacifist from very early on, as I said my parents were guerrillas and you know what the price we paid in PTSD, trying to live as normal a life as possible, or as normal as it gets when your grandfather was born in a concentration camp.

There’s a huge price to be paid by the people who not just give their lives, but their spiritual wealth over to killing, and I think that shows you quite how bad apartheid was that people thought it was necessary, and I think it shows you quite how bad Palestine is that people feel that’s the only choice they have. But I don’t morally judge it. I don’t think there’s any such thing as good violence, I think sometimes there’s something like necessary violence, and particularly the last three months after the Israelis closed off the Rafa corridor, the only people that are protecting Palestinian women and children, and people generally, is Hamas. So that’s really hard to condemn. I want to caution against false equivalency. International law does not allow for any kind of equivalency between the occupier and the occupied. Neither does South African ideology. For us, and I feel it especially as a Namibian, because much of the armed struggle took place in the northern half of Namibia, in the southern half of Angola, it was hectic for Namibia, it still is. Many veterans coming home, and you know Namibia is not a country where you can make sudden noises, or jump at somebody behind their back, because people are still a little bit trigger happy. This is the long-term consequence of violence. It’s not a simple thing to make that choice or choose that option. And although as a pacifist I never participated in the armed struggle, I’m fully complicit, I would bring medicine, I would bring money, blankets, food. I was a support structure. But the simple thing is that the National Party mothers simply got tired of their sons coming home in body bags. And that was a huge factor, a huge factor pushing them towards negotiations. Because since the 80s they were in and out, negotiated then changed their minds, then they literally started running out of young men. From ‘92 onwards they got really serious, and two years later we had a political settlement.

I want to raise all of this as factors that I think are positive for Gaza and Palestine. I do think the Israelis are long past the point where they have any kind of choice in the matter. Now my latest thing is studying Zionism as a cult. And it’s true, I understand that people living in Israel have less access to information than we have, because everything is censored, and it’s such a closed system from childhood on. Who treats their children like that? Isn’t that child abuse? You can see it’s a highly totalitarian system, and that’s why I’m interested in drawing lines with Nazism and fascism. Because the systems are identical in their totalitarianism, and in the intolerance of dissent. If you remember, among the six million Jews and queers and indigenous people who died in the concentration camps there were a number of Germans who objected and found themselves in the gas chambers. I don’t want to judge, and I want to feel compassion for them. But the bottom line is, most Israelis don’t know for instance that every time they get $20 billion from America, most of it is debt that’s going to have to be paid back. We know that in South Africa because that’s why we got landed with a negotiated settlement, we paid back the debts from the apartheid wars that were done to kill us and our children, the wars that were done on our bodies. We paid, and we just about finished paying in 2018, then we had to take out another IMF loan for Covid in 2020.

The Israeli state is running out of money, there’s no energy supply in Israel except for three offshore natural gas wells. It doesn’t have oil. And so it desperately needs Palestine, it’s dependent on its Arab neighbours for energy. The last thing I want to say is that ironically it turns out that 50% of the weapons being used against Gaza by Israelis are being reclaimed and repurposed by Hamas. Every time you see a figure like $20 billion arms for Israel, it turns out that $10 billion is going to Hamas, who by the looks of it can appear to fight on indefinitely. Look all I can do is say ‘You do survive genocide’. You do survive genocide and you do become a lifelong peace activist, and end up – you know – hanging out with Women in Black. The only other thing I can offer you is that you really end up being scared of very little. There’s very little that can scare me because I’ve already looked it in the face and said ‘Well, what more are you going to do?’ I’ll leave it on that note, and open up for questions.

**Rebecca Johnson(UK):** Thank you SO much. Could you tell us a little more about your family?

**Yvette Abrahams (SA):** OK, so my father is South African, born in Cape Town, although from his mother’s side descended from slaves who were brought here from South India during the period of slavery. So I guess that was part of what I was saying, that we are survivors of genocide in many different ways. There are slow genocides, then the short, sudden massive human killing machines over a very short period of time, and that’s the legal definition of genocide. On my mother’s side, she was born in Namibia and we often say that the Germans committed genocide there from 1904-1907 as a practice run for the Second World War. On my mother’s father’s side, they killed 80% of his people. On my mother’s mother’s side, my grandmother’s, they killed 60% of her people. And I’m a survivor of that history. So my feeling is in times of genocide, you all pull together, and you all do what you can. When I sat down to think ‘What can I do’ I thought hell, I can write a training manual on surviving genocide, and that’s what I have been doing.

**Lepa Mladenovic (Serbia)**: Hi, I’m Lepa from WiB in Belgrade, and I’m really fascinated by all that you said, it’s so moving, and it really makes us feel as if this is one world, and how it’s so connected – and also what you said that after all these experiences of genocide we must have hope. I have one question, and that’s about the term you mentioned – ‘de-childing’. How should we understand the term in the context of Palestine, or your context?

**Yvette Abrahams (SA)**: So, all of that Western theory of child development, none of that happens in Palestine, when you’re a victim of genocide. I ponder about it a lot, because of course its my revolutionary duty to be as sane as I can. I think we are all products of our social circumstances, and one thing that happens when you are oppressed by people who want to exterminate you is you don’t get a chance to be a child. There’s one Palestinian, I think he’s 14, he says ‘I’ve seen four wars’. So I was just raising that in terms of my own history, which was that from the age of six I had to go on the run. My parents went on the run many times, sometimes with us, sometimes without us. But I’m here (laughing)!

**Lepa Mladenovic (Serbia):** You’re wonderful, and we have to laugh sometimes!

**Yvette Abrahams (SA):** It’s never too late to have a happy childhood!

**Sherry Gorelick, (USA):** Thank you so much, this is so rich and so moving. I want to ask you about a contradiction I feel – you call yourself a pacifist but talk about the necessity for armed struggle. And as a person who absolutely can’t stand violence, but I live a privileged existence so I don’t have to confront it personally, the fact that Women in Black has stood as an anti-militarist organisation is deeply important to me. Yet I know what these realities are, so I want to ask you how you deal with that contradiction of calling yourself a pacifist but expressing the need for oppressed peoples to fight back, including with violence?

**Yvette Abrahams (SA):** I shall not attempt to justify it. I mean that other great pacifist, Nelson Mandela, also Archbishop Tutu, they would try to justify it by talking about necessary violence. And in my culture, there’s certain specific rules around war, I mean what we meant by war before colonialism probably looked like a rap contest – you know, you walk up and mock the enemy, then they take a step and mock you, then eventually the audience decides who’s got the better rap. And we were horrified at German colonialism, like the famous writer Dr Hendrik Witbooi said, ‘These Germans have no manners, they have no shame, because they raid women and children, they pick on non-combatants’. He’s very famous for sparing men from the armed struggle to escort a missionary and his wife from the danger zone, because you have to spare a man of the cloth. We had rules around warfare, but that’s not to say I would have approved of it even then.

I’m a traditional healer by profession, and by definition I may not give life and take life. If I’m a healer, then I cannot also be a warrior. And that’s just one of the cultural prohibitions that I have. Some contradictions you never resolve, you just live with them. You wake up in the morning and you’re contradicted, and you go to bed at night and you are still contradicted, and that’s what I’m saying is that the only way to make sense of it is to accept that. I was always against any form of violence, and I think doubly so precisely because my parents were guerrillas, because I got an inside view of what violence does to the person who commits the violence. I don’t think you will find anybody more pacifist than I am, because I have absolutely no illusions about violence. I was not one of those youngsters who go ‘yeah, go out and kill the enemy!’ because I was like, what about the person who has to do the killing? That’s a huge thing, particularly spiritually. I mean, to sacrifice your life is one thing, to put your everlasting soul on the line for your people, that’s a whole different kettle of fish, even spiritually. I concede all of that, and I still say that we wouldn’t have gotten to where we were without the armed struggle.

I think it was Che Guevara who said, ‘at the heart of every guerilla is love’, and I certainly didn’t know any more loving people than my parents. Those were people who were full of love and laughter and joy, and they did it for us, so that I can sit here in Gordon’s Bay and attend the conference, and I’ve got privilege too, I’ve got internet and zoom, all kinds of interesting stuff, and I was a stateless refugee at six. At one point we had nothing. And so I can acknowledge that violence is wrong. I can acknowledge that war is wrong. I can acknowledge that it’s both spiritually and psychologically not good for anybody. I can do all that and I can still, as a historian, observe that had it not been for the armed struggle waged by Black South Africans and their white compatriots, I mean famous Jews like Joe Slovo, Ruth First, Albie Sachs, many, many people gave their lives and their well-being for this country to be born. The conscientious objectors, those of you in Britain probably know Andrew Feinstein best, but that was a big movement. It took everybody, and what everybody contributed to make peace happen, and I would be a very bad historian if I denied that. So, I don’t know, Sherry, if that satisfies you, but that’s two impossible things before breakfast! I could probably say a lot about a system that embeds you in these contradictions, in the same way that I will wake up in the morning and say, ‘I want to rid my house of plastic’ and realise that in practical terms that’s probably going to take me 10-15 years to get plastic out of my life. You learn to live with these things, and we get up in the morning and do what we got to do. But should anybody ever ask you ‘is peace better than war’ then I think nobody but a genocide survivor is going to be more passionate in saying ‘Yes, we are for peace’.

**Rebecca Johnson (UK)**: I can remember being arrested in the 80s while blockading and protesting at South Africa House and being dragged away and held in the nearest police station to South Africa House, which as many of you know is on Trafalgar Square in London. Also I can remember being on a platform as a Greenham woman on a joint Anti-Apartheid and Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament really massive rally, I think it was in Hyde park, and I turned out to be the last speaker before Oliver Tambo came up on stage, and Oliver Tambo came up and enfolded me in the most massive hug. I mean he was a big man, and he just held me, and I was quite young and nervous, and he kind of infused me with his energy. And just hearing him speak there led me to join the ANC, as well as Anti-Apartheid, because you were able to do this in the UK, and I’ve dealt with that contradiction that you’ve spoken of many, many times. It will be spoken of many times in this conference, looking at the issues of non-violence and self-defence, but the answers you gave Yvette are very much the answers I gave when people used to say to me ‘how can you condone the ANC’ and I said ‘it’s not my business to condone anybody, I have chosen to support them, and its not part of my non-violence to condemn what others in struggle do, because I am not in their shoes’. I’m also privileged and white, and it is a dilemma, and maybe can’t be resolved. We all have to make our own peace, in a sense, with our own dilemmas and choices, and I just loved how you expressed your choices, and we will continue to have those dilemmas and maybe as non-violent activist who believe we have to be active, and to have solidarity, we have to live with those contradictions.

**Jenny Engeldow (UK)**: Thank you so much for that Yvette. I just wanted to say that on Conscientious Objectors’ day in May we always have a stall in Brighton, and one of the things we were talking about was the effect of PTSD, the effect that’s going to happen to the Israeli soldiers when they go back home, and of course the domestic violence that will follow, that it’s a downward spiral. And the damage that Netanyahu is committing to his own people is so profound, its horrific. And I also just wanted to mention the book *’The Kaiser’s Holocaust: Germany’s Forgotten Genocide and the Colonial Roots of Nazism*’ by Casper W.Erichsen and David Olusoga (2010), it might be of interest to you.

**Yvette Abrahams (SA):** Thank you all for the allyship. That was definitely second or third on my list when I look at how we came to a negotiated settlement. And popular protest and BDS overseas was critical in bringing the government to its knees. So, thank you all of you who supported us. I think what we can all agree on is that peace is definitely better than war. Which is to say that if you had not supported the Black South Africans at that time, we might still be oppressed and still under the need to resort to violence, to defend ourselves. From the South African and Namibian side, we have run this pretty much as we have run our own transitions to Black majority rule, because we had the – shall we call it privilege? – of having worked through this twice before, so learning what worked and what didn’t work. Israel and Israeli women are going to pay a terrible, terrible price for what is being done at the moment to Palestinians. I mean one of the reasons I’m a pacifist is my awareness of what Nelson Mandela always used to say is that the person we must feel sorry for is the oppressor. Because in order to do what they do they have to dehumanise themselves. And that is a loss that you never get over.

I was recently at a Feminist Conference in Stella Bosch, and I quoted Toni Morrison who said ‘I’ve always felt moderately superior to white people because we don’t know what it is to have to be ashamed for our ancestors’. But when you are on the other side, if you look at the Germans defensive reactions to Palestinian demands for international law, that’s a very good case of people who have never really resolved this stuff around the violence that they committed. And I’d say not just six million Jews and others, but 13 million Russians, there was a lot going on. I think we can unite in our condemnation of war. I can tell you that if I was in the West, and especially in the key nations, Britain, Germany, the US, I would be firmly and unequivocally against war in any form. Not to blame anybody, we are each responsible for our own moral choices, but just to say that I think in the situation where there is only one choice, and that is to say, this has got to end, I don’t want to pay for it, I don’t want to live with the government that’s prepared to pay for it, and that’s that.

**Rauda Morcos (Palestine):** I have been listening, and Yvette already answered what exactly I would say towards this ‘are you with violence or non-violence’ question. Even that question is problematic – asking a Palestinian or South African person ‘are you with non-violent or violent action’ is already problematic. The problem is with that question, not the answer. Because really what Rebecca just said, I cannot put myself in another person’s shoes. But we can always, actually, imagine if we are in a situation of violence towards us, what would we do. I remember when I was a kid, I was raised in a very secular home, I mean not very religious, but I was into choirs, I was into singing so I used to go to the choir, just to sing. My father was actually a bit worried that they would take me to the religious side. But one day I wanted to ask the pastor, the priest, a question about Jesus. I said to him, there is a saying that Jesus said, if somebody hits me on the first cheek, I turn the other cheek – so is he really so stupid that he would turn the other cheek? And he said: ‘Oh no, no, don’t think that. Not at all’. And luckily, I was asking this question to the perfect priest, who used to be very active against the Occupation, he is a communist, and also a priest. He told me, listen Jesus Christ was not really stupid, and he was definitely not a fool, to really turn the other cheek to the person. What we mean in that is that those people who hit you on one cheek are not trustworthy, so you should turn your cheek and actually leave them. It’s just a simple and very naïve example. How we react to violence – do we really expect that Gazans should turn the other cheek to the Israeli Occupation that has been hitting them? I mean that would be so stupid to expect from people in Gaza. To think that they can go on after 10 wars, probably, since the year 2000, not even counting stopping the water, stopping the electricity – they have one hour a day sometimes, and sometimes none – I mean other means of genocide. I really don’t want anybody to fall into that place of judging is it an unviolent action or a violent action? I mean, really, it’s hard to say. But yes, against war, that’s the term that I would go with. Thank you, Yvette.

**Yvette Abrahams (SA):** No, no, thank you Rauda for surviving genocide. It can’t be easy. There was something I wanted to say earlier, that something felt very familiar to me with the early nineties, when the nation was liberated from Apartheid, and so we started working more on our female empowerment, and formed Black women’s organisations, and as Black women academics. We started out and – would you believe it – the descendants of the National Party, the descendants of the colonisers, would say to us: how can you speak for Black rural women? And it was so funny that the same tools that had been used to shut us up were now being inveigled in a new way. So, I perfectly got that feeling of frustration when they said ‘Well, you’re this kind of Palestinian, or that kind of Palestinian, and therefore, somehow you can’t represent the voiceless’. I was like, my grandmother was a farmer, and it took us three generations to get a PhD for you to actually listen to us. So don’t tell me I can’t speak for her. Took a lot of patience. I guess what it shows is that, first, I refuse to be a perfect victim, and I don’t feel that Palestinians should need to feel any kind of way. Your cause is just. The ICJ has said so. And whether you are good victims or bad victims, nice people or nasty people, is not at all relevant to the facts of the case, which is that somebody is colonising you. Somebody is committing genocide on you. And those people must stop. So, whether you are with Hamas, or any other of the political leanings amongst Palestinians, really has nothing to do with any one of us. And that’s because, as you can see, I’m also not a perfect victim, I’m a complicated person with contradictions. And I’m often wrong, at least once a day, just to keep me humble! I think if you earn nothing else by being a victim of genocide you earn the right to just do you. And I use victim in that collective sense because, like I’ve said about exemplary violence, when they do it to them, they also do it to us. There’s no other way to live through this. I mean it’s even retraumatised my PTSD, and I’m so far away sitting in safe Cape Town. It must be hell on earth for you. But the one thing you don’t need is anybody telling you how to be, or what to do. So please be awkward, inconvenient, contrary victims!

**Arla Eretz (USA)**: Yvette, thanks for all your very wonderful, deep, thought-provoking words. My question, just to give a little background, I was active in the anti-apartheid movement for free South Africa back in the 80s and into the 90s. And in the 90s we worked together with some ANC representatives who would come to visit us in the Bay Area, and say now here’s what we want you to work on, and then when there was going to be the election, they said we need people to come and be an international presence to try to quell violence, and work on the campaign. So I did go there for that and before I went to South Africa I went to Palestine and I just said to myself ‘This is South Africa’. And now I’ve gone several times to Palestine, including 2002, and right now what’s going on in the West Bank is like 2002, only on steroids. And I’ve been involved in trying to stop the genocide, or being in solidarity to do what I can, and also now working in solidarity on village defence in the West Bank. But what I was wondering is, if you have any thoughts on what now, today, in this particular situation, international solidarity activists, such as me and others, can do? And if you have any recommendations, thoughts, or reflections?

**Yvette Abrahams (SA):** Well, thank you once again for the solidarity, and international solidarity is one of the most important factors I think I mentioned it second on my list of factors. And of course, one of the reasons is just being human. I mean, bad enough being genocided, genocide alone is a horrible thing, but our tragedy only came to an end when it began to hit the German press, after about three years. But in this internet age it’s very different, and sometimes you don’t know what to say. Sometimes the only thing you can say to a Palestinian is look, I’m here, I’m walking this with you. You don’t have to do this on your own, and these are terribly moments. But some of the things we have seen in the last 10 months, I mean I’m a third-generation genocide survivor and I’m shocked. I thought I’d seen it all, I lived through the South African and the Namibian struggles, it was ugly, this is worse. And in the same way, I do think Israeli apartheid is worse. Like I jokingly once said, well they let us have chocolate. You know the kids in Gaza don’t get chocolate. I mean, we did not have separate roads. In a lot of ways, Israel is like South Africa on steroids. At least we were able to share roads. We did have some very obscure rules, like you could share back fence, but you couldn’t share front yard. You could have Blacks and Whites living with their back fences against each other, but they couldn’t face each other. We had some crazy rules, but for me Israel is another – I was looking at these photos of the West Bank with the settlements and then Palestinian villages, and I was like, that is so spatial apartheid. I mean those are the things that we still struggle with 50 years later, because those are the hardest things to change. Things around urban geography, things around city planning, it is so in our society. And when the kids were born, the ones we call the ‘born frees’, post 94, and they say, ‘why aren’t we free yet?’ And I say, well its going to take time to rebuild all our cities.

If I was in one of the major Western powers, and I have to say this, what’s been fascinating for me this last 10 months, it has been emotionally so painful, but you know nothing can stop you from learning. And what I’ve learned from this is, it seems to me that people in the West started off in solidarity, as allied movements, only to discover we cannot free Gaza and Palestine unless we free ourselves. And a lot of people have spoken about this genocide as the mask off moment because suddenly all the delusions you’ve been living with around democracy, rule of law, international government, suddenly disappeared. And so in many ways people are discovering that in order to free Gaza, they are having to free themselves. I mean, nothing is more striking than those far-right protests in Britain, right? And because people had spent nine months building up a Palestine movement – not that there wasn’t a movement before, but a permanent 24/7 kind of a movement, every second Saturday we march, every Friday we’re down at City Council, and because of that they were able to overnight get up and march against the far right, and protect things like refugee hotels and so on. It’s a terrible, terrible thing to say, but there’s a way in which the solidarity is actually a blessing for us. I mean in South Africa, for example, we had to get rid of a corrupt President before we could do the solidarity that now takes place. We had to become adults in a political sense.

So I guess what I’m saying is, because the nature of the beast is global, because there’s this war machine that manufactures profits for the few billionaires, and their tame politicians, I almost want to say slave catchers, to those of you who are descended from slaves you will know they use people who look like us, so you trust them, and then they catch you and throw you back into the plantation. I would think around in what ways I am free? When the beast is so big you can attack him anywhere, you can attack his toenail, you can attack his tail, you can attack his snout. If you’re close to his eye – great. Sorry again for using these non-pacifist metaphors. If you’re close to his brain, you can mess with his mind. How about that? But really, that political system of yours is not what you fought for in 1776. It's not even what you had in the 1960s with the Vietnam war. It has become more centralised. The fact that your President is breaking the laws, and State Department officials are resigning and saying to him, you are breaking the law, and nothing is being done. It reminds me of us in 2009 with this corrupt President that even got re-elected. So, I guess what I’m saying is, in order to mount effective solidarity, it has got to start with putting your own house in order, with calling your own rulers to heel, and saying we had this desire to be a society of law. You know the fact that 80% of Democrats, apparently, according to polls, are against the war. What does that say about no taxation without representation? What happened to your representation? And for me those seem to be like the deep issues. Not going to be a free Palestine until we all are free. And I think that’s what Nelson Mandela meant when he said South Africa’s freedom is bound up with the freedom of Palestine. It’s about how we slot into these global systems, and whether we are in the Metropole or whether we’re far out, we’ve all got a job to do, I think.

**Clara Mazo (Colombia):** Yvette, you are a wise woman, as well as a healer. Thank you for your power, and your laughter, everything you have lived through, and you don’t stop laughing. That gives me a lot of strength. And we’ve survived 60 years of fighting in Colombia, so we needed it. Thank you.

**Yvette Abrahams (SA):** And Colombia, obviously, being my hero as the first to cut Israel’s coal – they supplied the majority of Israel’s coal. So, I’ve described that single act as the mortal blow to the Israeli economy, because nothing is going to stop them from fighting more surely than that, the settlements won’t have energy, Tel Aviv, everywhere they’re not going to have energy to power that economy. You people are my heroes, the more so because I understand that loss of income and jobs is a big thing for a country in the global South to do. But we’re hoping that South Africa will not be too long, in a matter of weeks we shall also stop exports. We provide 9% of Israel’s coal. But you know we all do what we can. Between Colombians and Yemeni, apart from the Palestinians themselves, are the absolute heroes of this moment.

**Rebecca Johnson (UK)**: Just to put Clara in context, she is one of the Colombian women that was on the International Advisory Group because also Colombia has volunteered to be hosting the next Women in Black conference in Colombia, in person, inshallah.

**Marie-Claire Faray (DRCongo)**: Peaceful greetings to all from Kinshasa. Thank you, Yvette, for raising your voice for this important matter, for our common humanity, peace and solidarity.

**Yvette Abrahams (SA):** Thank you so much, and of course I hope that we are all recycling our cell phones and our laptops, because people are dying for batteries in Congo. Gaza is only the beginning, and I guess that would lead me to my final remarks, which is I think we are seeing the beginning of the end. BDS is bringing Israel to its knees economically. They’re simply not able to mount an expensive war for much longer. I think now is the time for peace to come to the fore because peace and reconstruction is not far away, and I’m hoping this is just a beginning. We have plenty to teach, if nothing else, and you know don’t make the mistakes we made. So, I’m hoping this is the beginning of a long year of continued cooperation between people from South Africa and Namibia and Palestinian people and their allies. I’m also going to say what the end of the Israeli war is going to mean for the powers that have been supporting this one. Supporting this war and paying for this war is of course one of the things that has helped mask the looming economic crisis in your own countries. In Britain, in Germany, to a lesser extent, and definitely in the USA, this era of expensive wars, especially since 9.11, has proved very costly, and in the past it hasn’t been unknown for dictators to fight wars simply as a distraction from real issues. I guess that just lends credence when I say now is the time for pacifism more than ever. Now is the time for peace more than ever. Now is the time for reconstruction. But its not something that is going to happen only in Palestine, we almost have to walk each other home on this. And I will leave it there, because we are going to pick up all these issues in the climate session. Thank you very much, it has been wonderful hanging out with you people once again!

**Session 4: Feminists building peace 1.9.24**

**Speakers: Vita Arrufat with Castelló and Valencia Mujeres de Negro**

**Introduction:** This session synthesizes the contributions of feminist women throughout history, both philosophers and activists, who created different narratives and experiences for conflict resolution, exposed the mental representations of patriarchy, and highlighted the invisibility of fundamental aspects for the preservation of life. We propose the creation of a new narrative, the advocacy of caregiving, new forms of relationships, and specific actions for the construction of Peace.

**Marisa Mendez-Vigo (Spain):** Our presentation has three starting points today. First of all, it is the result of reflections, debates and the shared experiences of our group over recent years, which have been characterised and influenced by war and conflict. Secondly, it’s based on feminism. Feminism has united and fed and nurtured us for over 40 years. Finally, the existence of the Women in Black network, which has also nurtured us, called upon us and enriched us ever since we have been part of it. The workshop will be developed in five different sections, each lasting about 10 minutes. The first part will be given by Maria Huertas, who will be talking about the colonisation of women’s bodies and the appropriation of words. The second will be Charo Altable asking ‘Are we doing enough to achieve peace?’. ‘Not in our name’ is the title. Vita will be talking about care: co-responsibility of care, references, actions and values. Then Carmen Mateo will be proposing different alternatives about relational reality. Finally, Christina Buitrago will be asking if Women in Black should be peacebuilders.

**Maria Huertas (Spain)**: I would just like to say thank you so much, to Rebecca, Sue, Heena, Liz and all of you who have been organising this conference, and I’m sending a really big hug to all our colleagues in Women in Black. Now, there are different versions of the origins of patriarchal structures studied by anthropologists, historians and philosophers. Some consider the private ownership of land and goods as primary, with the appropriation of women following thereafter, we’re talking about Simone de Beauvoir, Morgan, Bachofen, Engels etc. among others. Others believe that it begins with the understanding of paternity and the colonisation of women’s and children’s bodies and voices, leading to the need for a home, land and servants (Victoria Sau, Raine Eisler, Marija Gimbutas, Margaret Mead). All these theories agree on the transition from primitive hordes to tribes, from nomadism to sedentism, and the beginnings of the primitive family. The master, with his women, children, slaves, home and land as his property. So this is the beginning of patriarchy.

And from the outset, wars became the specific and chosen means for the patriarchal order, for its maintenance, reinforcement, and continuity, to the point of forming the foundation on which the civilisational narrative is built. We have been educated, and we have lived in, a history sustained by wars, conquests and colonisations, slavery, apartheid, exploitation, plundering, mutilations and rape. Different civilisations, races, people and cultures have suffered some or all of these types of violence. All women have. This is the patriarchal paradigm in which we are immersed, of which Victoria Sau says ‘We do not know the laws that govern it. If we did, we would be horrified’.

The narrative that we have learnt since childhood is so consistent and stable that to have a world without wars is considered utopia. However, we must be aware that we live through, and in fact we suffer, true dystopias. Today’s wars are justified to us by various pseudo arguments - the demonisation of the adversary, the dehumanisation of the population to be destroyed, the danger of invasion of our territories, and national security - that consist in creating a system of barbarism in which the population is illegally killed, hospitals and schools are destroyed, the water supplies and any necessary infrastructure for survival, their relationships and life projects, all of this is destroyed. The battlefield is the cities. Women are raped with impunity, they’re trafficked along with children, and millions of people are expelled from their lands, turning them into refugees and displaced persons, a humiliated population that neighbouring countries do not want to receive. Rationally and emotionally, for the general public, these facts are incomprehensible, inhuman, and abhorrent.

We can inform ourselves exhaustively through documents, texts, lectures by historians and political scientists, about the reasons for armed conflicts, but the sophisticated strategies used today prevent us from reaching a proximate explanation of their origin. The ‘warlords’ are invisible, there are so many reasons, but they are all invisible and simply unimaginable. And in the face of this rational, ethical and moral void, the words for Peace must be validated. We are living in a world without future. Our planet, our eco system, is reaching its limits. Manufacturing, research and the arms trade have become some of the main investments for banks, capital, and the budgets of our own governments. Barbarism, wars and genocide form part of our daily landscape. Egocentrism, individuality and extreme competitiveness all lead to the destruction of others and have become values to be imitated. It’s necessary and urgent to build another paradigm, because the patriarchal one makes life unviable.

Maria Sambrano in her text, ‘*The dangers of peace’* tells us to live in peace, or cease to live’, and that the situation created by fear lacks moral substance. ‘Between victory and defeat, we choose life’, says Christa Wolf. And Simone Weil asks us ‘Do we lack documents, evidence, proof, to build our reasons or do we perhaps lack words to express that war is irrational? Virginia Wolf in *Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid* suggests another way to fight for peace without weapons – fight with our minds, thinking against the current, not with it. And in *Three Guineas* she offers this proposal; ‘the best way to prevent war is not to repeat your words and follow your methods, but to find new words, and invent new methods.’ Rita Segato revises the feminist slogan of the 1970s ‘the personal is political’ and changes it to ‘domesticating politics, recovering the styles of socialisation, negotiation, representation and management accumulated as women’s experiences throughout history – a history censored, cancelled and hidden. Reweaving community from existing fragments.’

It would take too long to talk about all the different contributions, ideas and experiences offered by so many feminists throughout history, but we cannot fail to mention some slogans and lessons from the international network of Women in Black, which we joined in 1992 thanks to Stasa and Lepa, who were the first ones that we met. We fell in love with the network right from the very first moment. Their slogans said ‘*Do not speak in our name! Not in our name! We have our own voice*!’.

There are many, many other slogans that have been used over the years, and which have really given us a very clear idea of how we can go about building peace. We don’t want to be victims, we want to be activists in the construction of peace. Our governments may be enemies, but we are friends and we need to talk together and we need to work together. During international meetings we have heard from many women who live in devastated cities and they have shared with us their stories, their grief over their losses, their hugs and tears, and during the night they have shared with us their laughter and their dances. And all of these experiences have led us to sorority, not just solidarity, they have led us to compassion, to take their grief as our own, with passion. Anna Safra, with Women in Black in Israel, in one of her statements recounts the march in Israel with Palestinian women for peace, in Tel Aviv, that took place on June 8th, 2024, and she says: ‘*Two banners, each measuring 150 metres, were displayed with 25,000 names of women, girls and boys murdered in the ongoing genocide. Each has a home, a smile, a story’. ‘We, Jewish and Palestinian women together, refuse to close our eyes and ears, we want to remind Israelis and the entire world of the dreams of so many people that will never come true’. ‘Fighting peacefully for our dream of a just peace, here and now. Stop the Occupation! Stop the War! Stop the Genocide! NOT IN OUR NAME*!’

We don’t believe that women are more pacifist, more capable, or better by nature. We do believe that our situation of estrangement from history and world governance has been imposed by the patriarchal structure, along with our dedication to care imposed by a subordinated and exploitative gender role, deliberately assigned within a patriarchal social structure such as the current neoliberal capitalist system. Our voice, which has been denied since pre-history; our history, which has been erased and deemed worthless; our contributions to life, culture and science, which have been ignored or undervalued, all of this allows us to speak from a different place, from a different perspective on the world around us. And from a different sensitivity to the atrocities that we experience in our own bodies, and the bodies of our children.

If women have been alienated from our own history, well fine, let’s continue speaking from that alienation, from outside, contributing a feminist vision of the world and the patriarchal structure that sustains it, with our own voice that places us right at the heart of everything, the preservation of a dignified human voice, and of a biosystem, and of nature. Our proposal is to create a different narrative. A narrative that leads us to the construction of peace. A positive narrative from a different perspective that values and makes visible all those aspects that the patriarchal paradigm hides, undervalues or minimises, but which is essential for co-existence, (and currently for survival) as well as for the well-being of the population. Elements that facilitate a fairer and more ethical world, which is the only possible world. The appreciation of its diversity in the human, animal and plant species (no-one should be demonised, no-one should be illegal).

There needs to be responsible and participatory care, healing relationships through collaboration, mutual help, and support. Let us create spaces where a different voice that is not colonised by the patriarchy can emerge, where reason and emotion can be expressed, where we recover the voices, history and messages of peace from history and from the present from so many people, from feminism and from anthropology, sociology, literature and art, all of which have been erased for transgressing patriarchal norms. Let us believe in a culture of peace, quality of life, and its construction. From the international network of Women in Black we began, and continue to say: ‘**No to war, not in our name! We have our own voice**!’

**Charo Altable (Spain)**: We are Women in Black, ecofeminists, and pacifists, we are against wars and we want to build peace, which we demonstrate through many peace-building initiatives and projects, with narratives that are different from the patriarchal war logic. This peacebuilding starts with a critical analysis of power relations that destroy life to develop an empathetic perspective on Nature, respecting the limits and diversities of territories and ways of life and human relations, placing the care of life at the center and recognizing the relationships of domination that patriarchy establishes between men and women and between some countries and territories and others. By sharing our grievances, in the patriarchal society we talk about our personal and collective experiences as women, we reflect and create new spaces where we can develop other ways of relating to each other, another way of understanding education, health, the economy, politics, and labor, and affective sexual relationships, other cities, other territories, and another planet that is more habitable for everyone.

It is necessary to construct other narratives of events, with words that are unrelated to power-submission relations, to replace the war logic and war narrative that occupies all our capacity to imagine different things. Words with capital letters like Homeland, Nation, Security, Economic Growth, Development, Sacrifices for the Homeland, etc., are words, as the philosopher Simone Weil says, empty of meaning. Because what do Homeland, Security, Development, etc., mean to displaced populations who have been left without territory, without housing, without work, without forests and crops, or without fishing grounds due to the interests of large mining, logging, fishing companies, or large monocultures of “development” for a few and misery for large populations?

What is called the economy is a powerful expansive system that rapidly devours minerals, forests, rivers, species, and people. It is a hegemonic economy that needs to grow by extracting more and more resources and is willing to sacrifice everything, territories and people, in order to increase profits, while simultaneously making invisible the mutual care relationships that are so essential for generating and sustaining the life of humanity, different species, and forests, rivers, and oceans.

So, what can women do to build peace/ We can recover the vast repository of human experiences—many of them from feminist women’s groups—that show us other non-violent ways of managing conflicts, such as mutual support, collectivizing needs, and cooperation and distribution of responsibilities. I will mention some of the many peace initiatives and projects that exist in the world: Movements of mothers, women in Colombia, Women for Peace in Liberia and Chipko women:

*Movements of Mothers*. In many parts of the world, mothers protest against violence and wars: particularly paradigmatic are the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, mothers in Mexico, El Salvador, widows in Guatemala against femicides and impunity, searching for the disappeared and demanding justice and reparations; mothers in Sudan, mothers in Chechnya and Russia who went to the front lines to bring their children home, as if they were school children just fighting in the playground. "Bring our soldiers back from the trenches immediately! Don't send our sons to the slaughterhouse!" The film Alexandra describes this, but unfortunately was only on for one week in Spain.

*Women in Colombia for Peace*. The feminist and pacifist women of Colombia are a shining example of persistence and collaboration for peace. The Ruta Pacífica and the OFP (Organización Femenina Popular) organized the Women's Tribunal.The OFP, embedded in a neighborhood in Barrancabermeja, in Magdalena Medio, tirelessly works with displaced populations, primarily women, and in fact one was murdered recently, building homes, community kitchens (the "common pot"), schools, and training programs for teenagers, with the aim of creating a new generation for peace. ultimately creating an affective community of cooperation and mutual support. Recently, they have created the House-Museum of Memory and Women's Human Rights. It preserves the memory of women's struggles for peace, justice, and reparations, honoring the assassinated women leaders, whom they call "the seeds of peace." "We do not give birth to daughters and sons for wars" they say. In the summer of 2022, they celebrated the 50th anniversary of the OFP's founding – half a century working for peace.

All feminist organizations in Colombia, including those in exile, living in Spain have worked on the essential points of peacebuilding, bringing them to the Havana peace talks. They also disseminate their rituals, narratives, symbols, and events through videos, theater, music, and dance, well integrated into the communities where these events have occurred. It’s truly a shining example of a possible different civilization.

We also have the *Peace and Demilitarization Collective of the African Great Lakes,* but someone else is going to talk about that later. There are so many organisations in Africa, but today I have chosen *Women for Peace of Liberia (WIPNET)* who realized that for years they had endured a horrific war where rapes, murders, and all kinds of violence were daily occurrences. Leymah Gbowee, who was a social worker, managed to gather several dozen women in 2002 to pray, sing, and dance for peace in a fish market, a place where child soldiers were recruited. This sparked a large-scale women's peace movement that united Christian and Muslim women, collaborating together leading to the formation of the Women's Peace Network (WIPNET) and organizing silent marches, a sex strike, and pressuring the president by staging sit-ins outside the palace until he attended peace talks in Ghana. They did the same with the warlords, the rebels, involving international media with their actions. When the war ended, they continued working for peace, justice, and reconciliation, building peace huts (palavas) as meeting places to analyze and resolve their problems, to support each other, and build peace in their communities. They are like women’s tribunals, mediating all kinds of conflicts, and working on women's education and literacy. They have demonstrated the power women can have when we unite for a common goal and have inspired many other movements in Africa, mainly in Nigeria and the Ivory Coast.

 Finally, I want to talk about the *Chipko Women*, a participatory movement of rural women from 15 villages in the Himalayas; these women stood guard and hugged trees to save communal forests when they were about to be cut down, responding to this violence with compassionate actions. They did it because they had developed together in their community an affective perception of the non-human world and a sensitivity that allows us to conceive of ourselves as beings in relation to other beings in nature, and everything that lives on the planet and the environment. They achieved this through dialogue, active listening, and reflection, becoming aware, gaining collective awareness and diligently practicing the care of the forests on which their survival depended. Thousands of women, with perseverance and patience, managed to defeat the logging companies - no mean feat.

All these women, and many more, accompany the victims and repair the hells of war, raising awareness, preserving the memory of disasters to prevent forgetting and repetition, creating schools and spaces for peace and conflict resolution. This is the great work of the non-patriarchal civilization that should be heard more, recognized much more, and made visible, both theoretically and practically, so that it can become part of written historical memory, school curricula, and mass media; TV, networks, videos, films, theater, etc. What more can we do to be heard as WiB?

**Vita Arrufat (Spain)**: I’m going to be talking about co-responsibility in care, care for life, and I’m going to try to find the discourse of peace. Now we know that transgressing repressive and alienating norms has been one of the pillars of feminism, as well as basic practice by marginalized groups—those who have been erased or alienated from history due to their racial, cultural, sexual, or economic differences.

Feminist achievements have been won without the use of violence. We must prioritize relationships of collaboration, participation, listening, support, and mutual aid over competition, arrogance, and the elimination of opponents. Against the corporatism and complicity of patriarchal power, we must respond with a discourse of sisterhood and unity, embracing our differences but being united. Let us continue demanding human rights for all citizens (healthcare, education, work, housing, food, and water), and to continue working to make care accessible to people and also the ecosystem. Let us place relationships and life at the center of all our interests, our economy, and our politics.

I’d just like to mention two things to bear in mind: that there is knowledge that has been transmitted orally by women, but other types of experiences have been denied, often-repressed, unexpressed or labeled incorrect, or devalued. Let us dedicate ourselves to recovering what has been repressed, excluded, and eliminated that is connected to caring for life and the planet and thus generating peace. It’s not only about peace but about quality of life, and we know if there’s no health, there’s no peace. And if there’s no health and no community action then nothing will improve. So we need to promote self-knowledge in all areas, including sexual and reproductive health – that’s another important part of our work. The first step is to recognize ourselves, to learn from others about our differences and similarities. The second step, from this perspective, is to get to know the people around us and the communities wherever we live, practicing resilience to overcome adversities. Every person, man or woman, must prepare to share the responsibility of care for life: Self-care, care for others, and community care which is what we call inter-care. If you want to find out more, you can look at the journal Mujer y Salud (Women and Health in English), you just need to type into a search engine ‘Revista Mujer y Salud’.

**We propose an initiative**: **"The DAY of CARING for LIFE."** You can choose whichever day you like, but it’s the day that together, we can put life at the center, together for peace. A day agreed upon by all, such as the date of Rachel's death, who died in Jerusalem murdered by tractor in Palestine, or the date of Hagar Roublef's death, or any another significant date.

In Plato's Symposium, as philosopher Nieves Muñoz Muñoz reminds us in her book The Echoes of the Unwritten Banquet (but its only in Spanish I’m afraid), women serve the table and clean up the remnants of the banquet that is enjoyed by men. Women have never waged wars, although, through our historical role as caregivers, we have accompanied men and participated in them—as cooks, quartermasters, prostitutes... satisfying men’s needs. In none of these wars did women voluntarily participate in combat.

We must value what feminist women have achieved, like Evelyn Fox Keller, who explained how the public sphere is identified as masculine and the private sphere as feminine; these limitations affect the knowledge of science and history and lead to biased interpretations.

We prepare spaces for peace every time we engage in dialogue, listen, and work collectively to resolve conflicts without using violence. And when we demonstrate on March 8th, International Women’s Day, gathering in the streets, performing acts, and reading manifestos in public places, when we take to the streets on November 25th or September 21st, International Day of Peace, when we demonstrate on March 5th, International Day for Disarmament Awareness and Non-Proliferation, and on May 24th, International Women’s Day for Peace and Disarmament. We also have Women’s Health Day.

We hold gatherings in the main square of every city, dressed in black and in silence. We read manifestos about the genocide in Gaza, every first Thursday of the month in Villareal and on Wednesdays in Valencia. We meet in joint meetings and actions of Women in Black (Mujeres de Negro) with the Assembly Against Wars in Valencia. We organize talks and colloquiums at the Universities of Valencia and Castelló. We commemorate every November 25th, International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, with performances in the Plaza Mayor, as the Women in Black Villarreal do, taking to the streets like Women in Black in Castellón or like the Women in Black in Plaza de la Virgen in Valencia.

Let us recover stories and experiences of peace processes, of achievements won through debates and agreements, of the involvement of women and diverse groups in peacebuilding. There is a history—women's stories—that has not been told.

**Carmen Mateu (Spain):** After this journey that we have gone on, thanks to my colleagues, through different moments and milestones of the evolution of feminism that can help us reflect and find new proposals on **what to do for the construction of Peace,** we would like to continue this presentation by telling you what possibly constitutes one of the latest contributions of feminism.

We refer to what has been called ecofeminism, and its concepts of ecodependence and interdependence, which Yayo Herrero recognizes as constitutive features of the human essence, while denouncing the mental representations with which the patriarchy has tried to understand and act in the world. These concepts are fundamental to the history of feminism, and the power and economic structures on which the patriarchy is based. It is precisely this patriarchal model that ecofeminism helps us to develop a different viewpoint about, a view that gives rise to, or gives voice to those underdeveloped aspects for the perpetuation of life.

Charlene Spretnak goes a step further in her book *Relational Reality. New Discoveries of Interrelatedness that are Transforming the Modern World* (2011), which introduces a new **concept of Relational Reality**. What does the concept of Relational Reality contribute? It focuses on everything that has to do with the relational aspects, how everything relates to each other, the way in which the elements that are part of life on earth relate to each other. Everything relates to each other. So analysing the situations of extreme violence that we are currently experiencing, from this new perspective, we may well ask ourselves the following questions: Do you really think that our culture, our science, is aware of, or has explored everything to do with relationships? Has it really delved deep enough into the way or ways in which we relate?

Perhaps the question I am going to ask you now might help reflect on this. Have you ever had the experience, have you ever been in the situation of wanting to establish a personal relationship, a work relationship, or a relationship with family or friends, have you ever found out that it doesn’t quite work out as you expect? That you don't know quite how to do it so that it is free from any unhealthy conflict, and is a peaceful and long-lasting relationship? Perhaps I can give you a personal experience, to serve as an example of what I’m trying to say. I always remember how much of an impact it had on me when our group asked some Afghan women when we went to Afghanistan what they would like us to work on, what issues, and they asked us how had we possibly managed to stay together as a group for over 40 years?

The situation of division and conflict between feminist groups, especially in Spain at the moment, is also an example, it has been a very difficult time. So, as I’ve said, the fact is that **the life in which we are immersed IS ALWAYS RELATIONAL**. It is a dimension that, like space and time, is transversal, a basic aspect, a basic dimension of everything that surrounds us, as well as what we ourselves are. Only that, unlike the dimensions of space and time, it has never been taken into account or talked about much in our culture except in a very superficial way, nor in our science with the importance and depth that it deserves. Do you think that we know enough about the complexity of the relational world? I don’t think so. And yet, when I try to talk about this new model of observation and understanding of the relational with some of my feminist colleagues, or even with some fellow pysychotherapists, the response I get is usually more or less the same. They tell me that the subject of relationships has been sufficiently dealt within each of their own discplines and I am generally left with the feeling that I don't know how to explain myself. I will try to do it a little better here, to see if I can get it right. I hope that in the debate we can do it in greater detail and breadth.

So let’s have another example of what the concept of relational reality means: At this very moment what we are telling you will acquire its meaning and will be able to grow or be of use because you have listened to it. Because in this context of searching for Peace, and denouncing patriarchal ways of relating to each other, we are open to dialogue, we are respecting each other, we are careful about the words we use, listening to each other, to reflect together guided by the values ​​of pacifist ecofeminism. Perhaps you will even reflect upon the consequences, and if you like, you will even start to share it, to elaborate it as well, helping in this way so that it can come into being. So seen in this way it would be worth asking, what could have been, or what could be the consequences of this lack of knowledge, of this ignorance regarding the relational in our culture and in our science? How could the fact that we have not taken into account, that we have not focused our attention and our knowledge on the service and analysis of such a real, basic dimension of what we are, of what everything around us really is, such as the relational, have been influencing us? What does it mean when we say that relationships need to be cared for? Perhaps the time has come to begin to care in a more complex and conscious way about the way in which we relate to each other, and see what happens?

And finally, we should remember that one of the pillars of our strength, I’m talking about the strength of feminism, is based on the ways in which we have been able to relate to one another. It’s based on the types of relationships that we have been able to create among ourselves, based on feminism and also within the Women in Black network. And I’m sure that it will be worthwhile to explore all of this in greater depth, and I hope that we will be doing this, all together.

**Christina Buitrago (Spain)**: Can we be peacebuilders? In the introduction, the topic of SPACE is highlighted as an important issue. Therefore, we will briefly touch on this topic. We all know that SPACE is transversal and includes everything. It is also important in both its form and its content. It permeates houses, neighborhoods, cities, countries, and the entire global world. All spaces are constructed and occupied for specific uses.

Within each of these spaces, we live, develop, grow, interact, etc., according to the functions for which they are intended. But all of them are created to develop capitalism and to support and perpetuate the patriarchal system. In all spaces, there exists a moral superiority (patriarchy), as Rita Segato, an anthropologist, states: “it is a structural problem because it is the patriarchy,” and “the states are not going to transform this.” We can say that to change the system, we must work to create TRANSGRESSIVE SPACES.

Many feminists, including us in Women in Black (MdN), have long been taking steps to create spaces outside the system, believing, like Margarita Pisano, that this is the only way to push back against patriarchy. Here are some examples where spaces that are transgressive have been built. Let’s start with:

1. Palestine-Israel: Women in Black, where Palestinian and Israeli women participate, creates spaces where they engage together and plan joint actions.
2. Experimental Schools for Women (Simone de Beauvoir): A Madrid-based organization created a different kind of school space that operated on the method of Research-Formation-Participation-Action. Two more schools were established, one in Cádiz and another in Murcia, and they conducted training courses for trainers across the state. This project was awarded funding by the European Social Fund.
3. Tania Magro Huertas: A young feminist architect, who, along with her team, constructed a plaza in a neighborhood in a Spanish city using the method of Research-Action-Participation, they developed the uses of the SPACE with the participation of residents, especially WOMEN.
4. O.F.P (Popular Women's Organization): A group of women in Colombia working in a neighborhood in Barrancabermeja. They have built houses, schools, community kitchens, and notably, THE HOUSE OF MEMORY AND WOMEN'S HUMAN RIGHTS, among other things.

We could list many more examples and mention other experiences of TRANSGRESSIVE SPACES, but we don’t have time, unfortunately. Let’s Create Spaces Outside the System

To advance feminism, we need to build a fairer world without wars that enables us to CARE FOR LIFE AND BUILD PEACE, and to do that we must create new spaces in houses, neighborhoods, cities, etc.:

* Spaces where we can build a framework of reference with our values, where we work for life and also for peace.
* Spaces where reason and emotion can be expressed.
* Spaces where women are visible.
* Spaces where we can have a clearer and cleaner perspective.
* Spaces where we can listen to each other.
* Spaces where we can craft new words, new narratives.
* Spaces that allow us to participate, connect, and care for each other.
* Spaces where life is cared for, and PEACE IS BUILT.

We know that all this – building spaces outside the system – is difficult. We repeat: LET'S BELIEVE IN A CULTURE OF PEACE, ECOLOGY, AND LIFE, and in the possibility of such a culture.

 **Ulla Kotzer (Finland)**: I’m Ulla from Finland, one of the latest NATO countries, with 1300 km border with Russia, and now we will have 15 NATO bases here, all over the country, and this is why I am very active in the Global Women for Peace initiative, and we invite you to join us before the next NATO conference in Vilnius. Last year we had a conference in Brussels. We couldn’t go to Vilnius because there is no peace movement there and we would have been beaten up by police, but we went to Brussels, the Headquarters of NATO, and we even had an audience. This year we didn’t have the money to go to New York so we made a photo display of 200 women showing slogans against NATO with the Global Women for Peace logo. I will put on the chat how you can take part in display no 2, because I think its good that we show our faces, that we say WE DO NOT LIKE NATO, the biggest war machine in the world. We have had a lot of webinars, you can see them on our website. We are very young, and very new, but we try to gather all women that do not like the war machinery. *Global Women for Peace United Against NATO* <https://womenagainstnato.org>

 **Vita Arrufat (Spain):** In Spain we have a long history with NATO ourselves, and we would be delighted to join this new, young, organization, because your situation in Finland is concerning, definitely. So thank you very much for that information, and we already joined you with photos.

 **Lepa Madlenovic (Serbia):** Good morning, I’m so happy to see all my friends from Valencia, and to hear your introduction, I’m Lepa Madlenovic from Women in Black Belgrade, and I just wanted to say that I prepared a photo of the All Women Orchestra of Afghanistan, that cannot perform in Afgrhanistan, for our session later today, to remember that they were playing in Afghanistan until two years ago.

My question is really about your group – I have listened carefully to what you said, and you are fantastically insisting on co-responsibility for relationships in all dimensions of our lives, on the fact that we all depend upon each other and therefore community is crucial for us. I know some of you from 1989, and you started your group a long time ago. What is fascinating for me is that your group, the same women you started with 35 years ago and more, is still together. Which really means that all these politics of caring for each other, and ourselves, is something that you live. So I really want you to tell us the history of your group, becuase you are a fascinating group, and above all, you started as a Women and Health group and then you became a women’s peace group, so this is a really fascinating history. Please tell us about your group!

**Maria Huertas (Spain)***:* We’re all want to tell the story! We have been up and running for 40 years, we started working for health and when we met Women in Black we saw the importance of peace and became Women in Black . What’s the secret? Well, we’ve always respected each other, valued each other, we haven’t dismissed each other’s opinions, we’ve criticised each other, but always in a very respectful way. We are all very different, some people have been lost along the way, but we are still together. I think one of the things that unites us is our enthusiasm. We’ve always had new things to get enthusiastic about, believing that we are able to do something. As Corinne Kumar always says, ‘Western women, you do something, and you want to see the result immediately, and that’s just not possible! Eastern women, we start to walk down a road, and we understand that the important thing is the process, the important thing is the journey’. It’s like Ulysses in the Odyssey, it’s the journey that matters, the process that matters, not necessarily the result. Maybe someone else will enjoy the result. So, that’s what we do, we continue to find new challenges, we come into contact with so many different women who teach us so many things, and they write to us and we incorporate all of that into our discourse. This is what we do. Me, in particular, I work with mental suffering, you can imagine how many people, and I learn so much from all of them, because generally they are transgressive women, women who have simply not been able to put up with the situation they are in any longer. And all of that helps.

 **Aiesha (Germany):** I just want to say that I’m so thrilled that I joined this session. It’s my first time at a Women in Black conference - you Spanish women are amazing! The structure of your presentation was brilliant, because I really needed that to try to understand where you’re coming from and what you are doing. And I want to come and visit you because I’m in Berlin and you’re in Valencia. Thank you so much for your articulation, it was so clear.

I love the fact that you are talking about a day in the week to celebrate life. What day in the week am I going to pick?!

I think just being progressive and thinking forward is really important. Yesterday I could see the audience, a lot of you have clearly been in this group for some time, I think it’s really important to think about how can I now talk about people of the generations I’m in, and the people below that age, because it’s those that are going to have the voice going forward and are part of the future. Me myself, I grew up in the UK and I’m so aware of the privilege I have because I was born there. My father was born in Pakistan, and after the Partition in India and Pakistan and Bangladesh emerged you could see there was mass migration and loss of lives, and so they moved to the UK, my Dad’s family. My Mum’s family moved from Pakistan to Kuwait after the Partition and then they experienced the Gulf War. So my mum talked about how the women in the family had to make themselves look quite ugly because they didn’t want to be taken advantage of, but they were, by the men when this was taking place in 2000/2001. And here we are today, listening to you tell the stories, telling the stories that go to show that the problems are still there. So I congratulate you for the talk that you gave. Thank you so much for writing out the text as well, the interpretation was absolutely brilliant. And for me, my takeaway from this is really to try to make others aware of what you are doing, because it’s brilliant. You’re going to be around for a long time, and to try to get others involved as well. So that’s all I wanted to say – gracias!

**Rebecca Johnson (UK):** Thank you so much. Can we have last comments from the women from Valencia and Castello?

**Maria Huertas (Spain):** We’ve been activists from the very beginning, and activism is what has prompted us to undertake this process of reflection. When you engage in activism you can think about it afterwards, what you have done and what you can do in the future. The work that we have done recently is a result of everything that has happened. When the war in Ukraine started, we started to protest, we joined Platform for Peace, we have been organising talks and demonstrations, two or three every month, and with other groups as well. We always came up against one response: ‘no conflict in history has ever been resolved unless it has been through war’. And that made us think, I’m sure that there are many experiences, many women who have examples of where conflicts have been resolved without a war. And how the word ‘war’, we have internalised it so much as a patriarcal paradigm that it’s unthinkable to solve conflict without war. And that’s where this reflection comes from. It’s based on our activism, it’s rooted in our activism, and the fact that we have been talking to many, many young people who think that a world without war is impossible.

**Corinne Kumar (India):** I remember all of you so well, I just wanted to thank you all – the women from Spain, and Rebecca, Sue, Liz and Heena for bringing us together. Your meeting today brought very important questions to us. I think that we really have to think of a new narrative, because we are all working at the old paradigm. And when you say that we have to look outside the paradigm, I’m going to tell you that we have to look at the global South, but not only at the global South – Asia, Africa, South America – as we have always done, but really looking at the south and the north. Because you are the south in the north, the Women in Black in Spain, and the Women in Black in England also, you are the south in the north. And we do have our north, with all the present government, with Adani and Anbari (in India) etc. That’s the thing I want to say to you today, Maria and Carmen and Christina and everyone who spoke today, that you are bringing a new kind of narrative, and we have to start a new narrative, we have to listen more to what you are saying, I’m so happy that you brought this. Yesterday also we had very good meetings, with Yvette, with Rauda and the Palestinian group, heart-wrenching but so wonderful. I think these meetings that Rebecca and Sue and Liz and Heena have thought of have been so wonderful for everybody. Thank you very much again, and thanks to everyone from Spain. I really thank you, and I give you lots of love also.

**Ana Valdés (Uruguay)**: My colleagues from Valencia, a message for you. I’ve only just joined, because we have hurricane strength winds here so I’ve had a problem with my connection, I’m really sorry. I just wanted to tell you that the text that you posted is fantastic, it’s the most inspiring thing I’ve read for many, many years, have just sent it out to all different types of groups all over the world because it’s really excellent. I think that text should be the basis of a whole new movement. So thank you very much for being so inspiring. On a personal note, thank you very much because you are really helping me with my cancer, you have been providing me with all sorts of different help and support, and I adore each and every one of you. And I remember the Valencia conference as one of the most beautiful things and experiences of my life, so thank you very much to all of you in Valencia.

**Session 5: Open space for WiB to share feelings about today’s wars, feminist ideas and ways to move forward**

**Facilitator: Rebecca Johnson**

**Sian Jones (Spain, ex London):** Thinking about how have women stopped wars: Ellen Johnson Sirleaf in Liberia?

**Ang Eden**: We need more stories of women’s activism, personal storytelling.

**Liz Khan (UK)**: *Twelve Feminist Lessons of War* by Cynthia Enloe is good for that.

**Jadranka (Bosnia Herzegovina)**: We are holding a women’s festival from 12-15th September, meeting outside, reading the names of the dead in Gaza. WiB support is important.

**Helena Paul (UK)**: we see war on the planet attack biodiversity. We need to expect less and take less – economic growth is not the way forward.

**Ana Valdés (Uruguay):** Stop the weapons sellers! We need an international embargo.

**Marie-Claire Faray (DR Congo)**: This is a platform of privileged white women. In the Congo they are using slaves to mine uranium, including children – this is a type of war. Africa is not on the UN Security Council. Our context is not taken into consideration. Dismissing other humanities is the greatest war. We have a network through WILPF (Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom) – Voices of African Women. We need to build trust.

**Margaret Bird (UK)**: In Newcastle, we are active on social media, linking us to lots of campaigns.

**Session 6: Gender Apartheid in Afghanistan, 1.9.2024**

**Facilitated by** **Ariane Brunet & Lepa Mladjenovic**

**Speakers:**

**Sima Samar, Afghan human rights defender, now based in USA**

**Zubaida Akbar, Afghanistan Program Manager for ‘Femena’, USA**

**Lepa Mladjenovic (WiB Belgrade)** introduced Ariane Brunet, her dear friend, lesbian, feminist, peace and anti-war activist from Canada who worked for the International Centre for Human Rights and Development, funded by the Canadian Government which established an office for Women’s Rights in Afghanistan for a time. The situation in Afghanistan is unprecedented.

**Ariane Brunet (Canda):** It’s true that we opened an office in Kabul, but I met Sima Samar when the first prize that we gave - the John Humphries prize – was to Sima. She’s an exceptional activist, but first of all, a medical doctor who opened clinics, including abortion clinics, and dozens of schools for girls. When she got the prize in Canada, the Royal Mounted Canadia Police came to our office to collect her because she had just been appointed the first Minister for Women’s Affairs in the Afghan government. After a few years she opened the Afghan Human Rights Centre in Kabul, and she will be able to tell you about that, as well how she became a UN Human Rights Rapporteur. Her clarity and understanding of how to continue to fight under and against Apartheid in Afghanistan is unique.

**Sima Samar (Afghanistan)**: It’s my pleasure to see so many friends, including Zubaida Akbar, who is the younger generation. How did we get to be in this situation? War is very destructive, it has an impact on the life of all the people, but human relations take a long time to repair. Our geo-political situation makes us vulnerable to powers being interested in Afghanistan.

I was a medical student in Kabul in 1978 during the pro USSR coup d’etat – they took power from the royal family, and under the name of socialism they started to arrest anyone who was not with them and take away their rights. Religious practice was restricted, and people started to fight against the USSR. In 1979, USSR forces, tanks and planes arrived to protect their friends, the ‘Revolution’. The war intensified during the occupation, they destroyed water points, killed, and many Afghans became refugees. The surrounding countries started to use Islam as a weapon of war against the Russians, funded and equipped by the USA, UK, Saudi Arabia etc. People became dependent on aid from the West, which established religious schools and madrassas, isolating boys as young as 5, 6, 7, 8, from their families and brainwashed them – instead of educating them in up-to-date science subjects or promoting quality education. The Taliban is the product of those madrassas. They not only harmed Afghanistan, but many of the surrounding and Muslim countries.

After 10 years the Russians left, in 1989, and their puppet regime collapsed in 1992. The hijab was brought in and enforced. The US achieved its goal as USSR collapsed, humanitarian programmes closed, and Afghanistan became the biggest prison for women, the biggest opium producer, and a training camp for terrorists, including Al Qaeda. By 1995, women working as news presenters were replaced by a rose on the screen, then their voices could not be heard, and the Mujahideen denied women’s rights. Taliban took power in Kandahar in 1994 and in 1996 they took Kabul, said no women should be seen outside the home, their footsteps should not be heard, and women were systematically isolated and discriminated against. Women were not allowed to get an education, always had to be accompanied by men.1992. The Mujahideen took power, the Mujahideen government was exclusive to Sunni Jihadi parties in Peshawar Pakistan, no women and no other minority groups were included in the government.

After 9.11 the US realised that Afghanistan had become a training ground (when I had warned them before, I was told ‘*We don’t interfere in countries’ culture’*). They invaded Afghanistan, bombed us (although no Afghans were involved in 9.11) and established a new government. I became the Minister for Women’s Affairs.

The last 20 years had seen possibilities for Afghans to get educated. But there was no clear and long-term strategy to build Afghanistan as a democratic country. Quickly US attention shifted to Iraq – and Da’esh – another disaster.

President Trump decided to end the war and signed a contract with the Taliban – four pages without the words ‘woman’ or ‘human rights’. Then you saw the chaotic, violent evacuation.

Taliban took power on August 15, 2021, and the first action was to abolish the Ministry of women’s affairs and to change it to Ministry of Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice. Erased women from public lives all together. Now women are only allowed to work in health, and education for girls schools to sixth grade – and then only if accompanied by a male relative. The US accepted all the Taliban conditions at Doha 3 in 2024. The Taliban claim they brought peace and stability – but they were the ones that took it away. They say that opium production is down – but that’s because they had a lot in stock and waited for prices to rise. Now they produce Amphetamines. The rights of minorities like Hazaras have been violated with impunity. Women again cannot be seen or heard in public now. Gender apartheid is a new style of slavery. Put yourself in the shoes of a woman who sells her six year old daughter to an elderly man to feed the other children (see Sima Samar’s book *Outspoken*).

**Lepa Mladjenovic (Serbia)**: Thank you so much for all your exceptional work wonderful Sima Samar, this is an excellent summary, as well as reminding us that Al Queda, ISIS, all these terrorists were the products of the USA.

Now I want to introduce my friend Zubaida Akbar, a fantastic activist in *Femena*. It is an organisation that was established in 2017 in USA to defend women’s human rights defenders, and Zubaida is in charge of women activists in Afghanistan. She is in contact with them on a daily basis. Thank you for all your exceptional work.

**Zubaida Akbar (Afghanistan)**: Thank you. I want to start with a quote from a woman about the new edict that women’s voices are banned: ‘*I am scared that soon the Taliban will kill our unborn daughters in our wombs*.’ The Taliban hate women – and have issued 100 edicts against every aspect of women’s lives. Women are now banned from walking alone, from education, from becoming doctors, from talking in public. Women cannot give birth without a man with them. The Taliban issued a 100-page book of Vice and Virtue laws. They are taking the right to life from women. If women go to a store with a male minder, they cannot speak. Everything is the same as the last time the Taliban were in power, but now they have supporters and allies in Western governments.

Western governments act as allies to the Taliban and fund and embolden them. The UN gives them legitimacy. The Taliban receive weekly cash from those governments. The world is moving towards normalisation of the Taliban. The UN engages politically with them. The Special Rapporteur on Afghanistan comes to the UN and praises the Taliban for counter-narcotics and counter-terrorism initiatives, but she does not speak about women. Women have been entirely abandoned. But women in Afghanistan have not given up. They have protested and raised their voices to say look, this is what’s happening in Afghanistan. This is what my organisation does, identifies those voices and supports them, provides mental wellness support, digital safety, and protects what’s left of civic space so that there’s this underground of civic groups ready to pick up the space as there’s nothing that can be done openly at present. The situation is hopeless.

Women risk their lives by raising their voices. Women defy the Taliban ban by singing, but they are alone in this fight. It is a clear case of double standards – international delegates refuse to meet with women activists on the grounds of protecting their safety – but their safety can be managed. The Taliban can get travel visas from the UN – while women have been imprisoned, tortured, and raped for demanding the right to education. These are documented facts. But unfortunately, Western Governments do not give a shit. Their focus has shifted elsewhere.

The fall of Afghanistan was for me, personally, the shattering of any dream I ever had, as a woman. When the Taliban collapsed before, we organised the first demonstration of young women against sexual harassment. The Taliban still managed to take away all joy in the years that followed. When I took my child to childcare, I had to go through fear of suicide bombers to work. I lost 16 of my colleagues to one attack, and 5 to kidnapping. During 20 years it was not peace, many of my colleagues and family were killed by the Taliban. It was our nightmare when they took over again. There isn’t a day when I don’t cry. I wish that our voices mattered. A lot of us are feeling that within the women’s human rights community in Afghanistan. More than ever, we look to feminist allies to say “*we see you, this war is going to be very long, but you are not forgotten*”.

**Ariane Brunet (Canada)**: We are very, very grateful to you. We need a deep feminist understanding of Gender Apartheid. The good news is that there’s already some writing about this from an international human rights law perspective. Bu the most important thing, if I may say so, is that all of us acknowledge the depths of this Apartheid. This is not the beginning, Sima Samar was very clear about that, it has been with us for a long time. What’s ahead is what’s frightening. And that we accept this, or we are not aware that this is what’s happening. I know so many Afghan women feel alone right now. It’s important that we get a solidarity movement now. And this is not only important because of the rise of theocracies – there are all forms of theocracies, not only Muslims, but Christians, look at the way the US is going – there are so many ways of religion getting back into politics. We have to come together and be clearer about how to help this situation, which can only get worse if we are not involving ourselves fully in this issue. There is a lawyer in the US who has started to write about the legal standing of Gender Apartheid, Karima Bennoune.

**Lepa Mladjenovic (Serbia)**: There was a huge session on March 8th 2023 in the UN Security Council on Afghanistan when Zubaida Akbar gave a report and used the term Gender Apartheid. Karima Bennoune, a feminist lawyer, originally from Algeria, says: ‘So what does it mean legally? What are the consequences of using the Apartheid framing in this context? Adapted from the international law on racial Apartheid, Gender Apartheid emphasises that discrimination has actually become the system of government, meaning that the segregation of women is the entire aim of government. The Apartheid framework then tells us that the ordinary human rights approach cannot work here. The only way that a positive change can happen is with a consistent and principled international response. So, one of the most powerful aspects of the Apartheid framework from South Africa is that it clarifies the legal obligation of other states to take effective action to end the illegal situation that the Taliban introduced.’ Karima Bennoune also says ‘South Africa knows better than anyone else in the world the consequences of the increasing attempts by some international actors to normalise the Taliban in spite of their repressive policies, while Afghan women risk their lives to demand equality. That should really outrage us. Gender Apartheid should mean that it is not legal for any state to be complicit with Taliban illegal actions. There can be no recognition of the Taliban until they end the system of Gender Apartheid.’ I know it’s our feminist dream, but I wanted to read this because it is important that one of our aims of Women in Black Against War International Network must be campaigning that Gender Apartheid is unacceptable.

**Ariane Brunet (Canada):** Iranian and Afghan women met in Paris, to feel among themselves what Gender Apartheid means – they are very sisterly and bonded. It is very important that we show our unmitigated support for the UN to recognise Gender Apartheid. (see *Karima Bennoune, Your Fatwa Does Not Apply Here, Untold Stories from the Fight Against Muslim Fundamentalism, 2013*)

**Sima Samar (Afghanistan):** After 20 years of fighting the Taliban, they bring back the Taliban, the NATO forces. The law of the Taliban dehumanises women and degrades women. It’s shame on countries that claim they are protectors of human rights. The danger is the empowerment of patriarchy. Neighbouring countries are following – in India, in Pakistan, in Iran. Someone in the Trump campaign said that we should treat women in the same way as the Taliban in Afghanistan – this is documented.

**Marie-Claire Faray (DR Congo):** Thank you so much for your insights about Afghanistan, and I would like to send solidarity to my sisters in Afghanistan. Even here Afghanistan has been used as a model, in the Congo some men are saying to women to shut up because some of the women in Afghanistan are not complaining about their treatment, so women should shut up and not act to come to the table. So, we really need to stand up against this Apartheid, and Apartheid is really the word to use in this case because there is separation and discrimination. We have been using the Women, Peace and Security Index 2023, and Afghanistan is at the bottom, then Congo just above (giwps.georgetown.edu/the-index), and when I’m teaching here, I use that index and some pictures of women in Afghanistan to show that it’s not local culture, it’s patriarchy. I really want to let you know that we are in solidarity with you.

**Sima Samar (Afghanistan)**: Thank you, I don’t give up, continue the struggle in different ways as I can.

**Helen Thompson (UK):** I just wanted to thank you all so much, you are fantastic women. Sima Samar, could you talk a little more about your work when you were Minister of Women’s Affairs, and about what we can do in solidarity, and to try to help?

**Sima Samar (Afghanistan):** A few things you can do – one, raise awareness in Women in Black and beyond. Secondly, lobby your government that sanctions on the Taliban should continue. It is a crime against humanity. Thirdly, we all have to take every opportunity to support education programmes in Afghanistan and maybe do fundraising for them. I fought all of my life for equality, now I’m a refugee for the second time. We don’t have any choice but to continue our struggle against the Taliban. You should stop your governments recognising the Taliban. You, as our sisters and feminists, in solidarity you should raise awareness about the situation of Afghan women everywhere, in every possible meeting. We should stand against the normalisation of the Taliban.

**Zubaida Akbar (Afghanistan):** Thank you, I think Dr Samar has covered the most important points. Firstly, the codification of Gender Apartheid needs to be supported. Secondly, Afghan women’s civic groups need funding so that they can share their message with the world. And with the ban on women’s employment, they don’t have any resources. The women I work with sometimes don’t have money to access the internet – so even a small amount of money helps. *Femena* is one of the organisations that facilitates this kind of funding to women inside the country directly, so very small amounts of funding can go a very long way, and I’m happy to connect about that offline. Lastly, it’s important to keep the light on Taliban, not to let it be forgotten while the world is trying to normalise Taliban, and to talk about the oppression of women – but to keep in mind that the oppression impacts different women differently. Women of marginalised ethnic groups, like Hazaras, they experience oppression threefold, fourfold, not just for being women but for being Shia, for being Hazara. And when we talk about oppression in Afghanistan, we always need to remember that as well. We need to elevate the voices of women, and to make sure that those voices are being heard. I mean, if a woman in Kabul is brave enough to go out on the streets and sing then I think it’s up to us to elevate those voices and make sure they are being heard!

**Lepa Mladjenovic (Serbia):** I will put links of *Femena* on twitter (@FemenaNet). We have met up with Afghan women activists online (without names and faces) to let them know we care. We can organise this again. The whole world is one world. There are many of us who care, and who also cry.

**Sima Samar (Afghanistan):** Thank you, and please do recognise our struggle and opposition to the Taliban. It’s so nice and beautiful to talk to you all, and to get courage.

**Dagmar Schultz (Germany):** My government has not yet recognised Taliban, and they say they will not. But they say they need to have communication with Taliban or they are letting women down. The other thing is, what about men in Afghanistan? Do women get any support from them? And if women are not allowed to give birth to girls, what do they imagine as a future?

**Sima Samar (Afghanistan):** I heard that Germany is planning to open an office in Afghanistan, which is disappointing. About men, the Taliban are so brutal that they keep men and women at gunpoint. They make the male member of the household responsible to control the female member of the family – so if a woman goes out with her face uncovered, it is the man who is punished. There have been men who joined protests, but Taliban are very violent against men as well as women. But the violation of women’s rights is not only the problem for women in Afghanistan, it is a problem for humanity, that‘s why it is important not to normalize the human rights violation of women under the excuse to respect the culture and religion or sovereignty of the country.

**Zubaida Akbar (Afghanistan):** I feel that support from men is not what it should have been. When schools were closed to girls without warning, I thought men would protest. The Taliban are emboldening the men who repress women. Early marriages and forced marriages are happening with the support of men.

**Ariane Brunet (Canada):** I want people to realise there are many possibilities to join those who are already organising to create a movement of solidarity, not just piecemeal activities. We are living in a world that tries every way to put us down as women. Putin is organising ‘The Best Mother of the year’ competition for women with eight or more children and trying to stop abortion – these views are getting increased mileage in the fascist world we live in. We need to harass our own governments and find each other.

**Session 7**: **Planet Earth,** **Our Fragile Home: Preventing nuclear war and climate ecocide** **2.9.24**

**Speakers: Rebecca Johnson and Yvette Abrahams**

**Introduction**: Through fossil-fueled greed, capitalism, militarism, and loss of respect for Nature’s diversities, humanity now faces two routes that lead to mass extinction of all that we love and cherish. Climate destruction and nuclear weapons are both caused by patriarchal-industrial colonial behaviours and mindsets. Together they push us towards more wars, genocide and mass destructions, famines and sickness, even nuclear war. **What do we need to do to abolish nuclear weapons and prevent ecocide?**

**Rebecca Johnson (UK):** Welcome everyone, I want to introduce Yvette, who those of you who were at her brilliant session on the first day will already have heard talk on South Africa, and the connections between Apartheid in South Africa and the genocides in Africa with what has been going on in Palestine. But I’d just like to remind you that what we heard also was that Yvette is of Namibian lineage, living near Cape Town on a farm. She comes from a family of genocide survivors, going back more than 120 years of the colonialist atrocities committed by the UK and Germany and a number of other countries. Yvette has spent her life as an anti-racist, anti-apartheid feminist, peace and environmental activist as well as being a farmer, a soap maker, poet, lecturer and writer. So, I hand the floor to you, Yvette.

**Yvette Abrahams (SA):** Thank you so much Rebecca, and I must say I’m actually intimidatedby that introduction because of course one doesn’t think of oneself as that. I think the more so sitting in such incredible company because, you know when I sit with you I feel that I’m only 61, and I obviously have a good few years of activism left to go. I can remember the protests at Greenham Common, I think I must have been about 11 or 12 at the time, I was pretty small, but the thought that I’m sitting in the same space as people who actually participated in that protest really makes me feel so incredibly honored. So, I guess what I’m saying is, I am who I am because I stand on the shoulders of giants. And it’s really fun, I think, in my generation of the feminist movement that we have forbears, that we weren’t first wave, or second wave or in fact third wave, so I’ve been graciously mentored by people like Corinne who took me under their wing and taught me how to be a big and strong feminist. And so, yeah, I guess that woman is me, the woman in the introduction. I’m just trying to say I didn’t make myself that way.

So, I just wanted to talk about the new anti-nuclear movement in South Africa. Planet Earth is such a big topic, but I thought let me just focus on that one and use that focus to bring in bigger and broader issues. And I think most importantly a philosophical one, since when you look at what nuclear represents, it’s one of those moments when I want to sit and ask myself, why is the human species bent on suicide like it is? It makes no sense, there is no intellectual or logical or economic sense that you can make of it. And in many other phenomena like patriarchy that don’t make sense you normally can tell yourself well, at least they make money from it. But nuclear power is not even like that. It’s currently one of the most expensive forms of energy, has never been one of the cheapest, and has survived largely through state support. Certain governments have been very tactically committed to nuclear power, and they have subsidized it throughout its existence. So even in that sense it’s not a capitalist energy form that makes sense, the only thing I can think is that nuclear energy gives you power over somebody else, when all other logic is lost, I don’t want to say it’s a dick measuring contest , because this is a very respectable seminar, I’ll have to think of a more polite metaphor. But it’s almost like it conveys a certain masculinist sense of power – and when you edit this recording you had better cut that very bad example for young feminists!

But the cool thing about nuclear power is it leaves waste, and it’s waste that human technology doesn’t know how to decompose. It’s obviously so anti-feminist, it is anti-indigenous people, its anti-Black, its anti-everything, because it leaves toxic waste that’s going to take a minimum of two and a half centuries to degrade. In order to run our toasters, if you see what that means. I’ve long been passionate about nuclear because it epitomizes that absolute loopiness of Western Society. Who does that? And what does that tell us?

My own coming of age about nuclear was in Sweden in 1980s, was it 1981 or 1982 when they had the big anti-nuclear referendum? I mean up to that point I was maybe an environmentalist, but I hadn’t seen all the implications of nuclear. And the anti-nuclear people lost that vote mainly because the ‘no’ vote was divided between two – there was a ‘no nuclear at all’, and there was ‘no nuclear in 25 years’. So the yes vote won. And that’s maybe also a tactical lesson that stayed with me throughout my lifetime, this notion of false alternatives, and that’s pretty much how nuclear survives. As you know, they now try to promote it as a low carbon form of energy, which is the most insane, it’s great to be low carbon but leaving toxic waste for a few centuries, it’s not helping.

You might not know, but South Africa is the only country in Africa to have a nuclear power station, and I went to dig up the book *Uranium Road* by David Fig, 2005 (think Fig like the fig tree). He has written a very thorough history of the development of nuclear in South Africa, and he’s also one of our great anti-nuclear activists. Basically the point he made was that when the National Party - that’s right, the National Party – during apartheid in the early 80s decided they wanted to build a nuclear power station in South Africa, they decided upon the Western Cape, and their logic was that the children of the slaves and indigenous people who are the majority population in the Western Cape were least likely to bomb it, the smallest security risk And of course we’ve been pretty offended about that ever since because we think we are at least as radical as all South Africans. But one of the consequences of that is, when the new government started wanting to expand nuclear power in the 2010s, somewhere from around 2008 onwards, they’re stuck with that apartheid plan.

So, the only sites that were up for building additional nuclear power stations were in the Western Cape, in my backyard. And it was based on those initial National Party assessments, so I don’t know what that says. There’s a lot of people that do work around the continuities and disjunctions between the new and the old South African State, and as I explained on Saturday, one of our problems was that because we were negotiating from a position of relative weakness, there were a lot of things that we couldn’t insist on, and one of the things we couldn’t insist on was a refusal to take over the South African government in total. Quite the contrary, we inherited all of them, all the civil servants and all their laws, and we literally had to move through the law books one by one to change them. One of the things we got stuck with was this nuclear policy. Now I don’t want to pretend that I was anything more than a backroom girl to this, because we had our real greats, Makuma, Liz McDade of the South African Faith and Environmental Institute, you know, people who had been working against nuclear for a long time and coordinated the strategy, but I slipped in on a banana peel, not just because I was against nuclear but because one of the proposed sites was actually the birthplace of Sarah Baartman. Now in my other life as an academic I wrote the first book length study of Sarah Baartman who was a Khoisan woman who was taken to London and then Paris in 1810 and she died in Paris in 1860. I wrote the story of slavery in exile, and an exhibition in Piccadilly. It’s quite something to think that 110 Piccadilly, if you ever walk past it, is where she was exhibited naked. If you see the place where Sarah was born, it has been a nature reserve for many years One of the things that I was doing was tracking Sarah Baartman’s natural world. What did she eat? What did she wear? What was her favourite smell? Her flowers? Cosmetics? Trying to humanize her. And it’s one of the few places where we have an original 18th century ecology, the ecology is untouched. It’s like old forest growth, and you can literally sit in a Khoisan woman’s kitchen and understand how they lived. One of the stupidest places to put a nuclear power station, and of course very offensive to indigenous people, and to our feelings of nationalism and integrity. Because why are we planting a nuclear power station on what is, after all, a holy site?

As you know, for the then President Zuma, who has been jailed for corruption subsequently, nuclear was a big part of that corruption - it’s much easier to be corrupt with a three trillion Rand contract for nuclear power which he was trying to award to Russia. Probably to be paid for favours, but he was very adamant about this Russian contract, it’s much easier to be corrupt with that than, you know, for 3000 solar power stations, the renewable energy, because it decentralizes, it has a lot more potential to push local power and be able to control the process. But what he was going for was this highly centralized, highly susceptible, and at that time already, we are now talking 2013-14, we knew this man is very, very corrupt. It took us another four years to actually jail him, but the evidence was there. So the thought of putting three trillion Rand in his hand and saying ‘poison the planet’, there was no part of this that was making sense. And briefly what I did, I said well, we still have a system of law, the fact that our laws are mostly applied and respected and observed is one of our great post 1994 victories. So, one of the things he’s going to have to do is to pass an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA). I simply went to that local area, to St Francis Bay, and sat there and waited for the EIA. And it was a fascinating strategic situation. St Francis Bay is a holiday town where there are only millionaires and then domestic workers and gardeners, and the domestic workers and gardeners weren’t allowed to talk to us because we were being read as anti ANC at this point by wanting to stop this big Zuma contract. So, they ordered all the Black people to stay at home. I literally sat with all these white millionaires, in the playground of the very rich, and fortunately for me what worked was the ‘not in my backyard’ syndrome. Pretty much all the millionaires said ‘I’ve got no problem with nuclear power, nuclear power is a good thing, but I don’t want it here. Let him go build it in his town’. Talk about strange bedfellows! But that’s how we won the EIA. And because he could not build it on that site, he couldn’t build it at all. They are now planning to expand the existing one, which is here in Cape Town, the one that was built in 1984. At the time there were one and a half million people in Cape Town, now there are four and a half million and, again, lots of millionaire real estate has built up around the one we already have. So our goals now are the same, to no longer be the only country in South Africa with a nuclear power station. How can we go about closing that down, and having no nuclear power in Africa at all, and being a nuclear free continent? I leave it at that, the struggle continues!

**Rebecca Johnson (UK)**: Thank you so much Yvette, and I’m sure there’ll be more opportunity to talk about some of the broader issues that I know are so close to your heart when we get into the main session. I’ve had to be living in this past year in kind of the 1980s, which is a very strange thing to do because it was the years I lived at Greenham Common, which was a women’s peace camp outside a US nuclear base back at the height of the Cold War, trying to stop a new generation of nuclear weapons, the Cruise missiles in particular that were supposed to go out on public roads. That was really where I got into the nuclear stuff, I’d been a feminist activist through the 1970s, and going further and further towards becoming a lesbian activist at that time, but I didn’t get anti-nuclear until I got back from Japan after two years teaching and ended up at Greenham. Some of you may have heard that there’s a public inquiry going on currently in the UK, into its undercover policing, what we call Spycops now. And it’s looking at how the state hired loads of people, mostly men, but one or two women, to infiltrate mostly left-wing, environmentalist, anti-nuclear, of course Greenham, networks and organisations and they picked even small groups like Lambeth Women for Peace, which was one of the Greenham support groups, and they infiltrated that. So, I’m a core participant in the inquiry because I was spied on, and I’ve had to be living in that sort of period, but also explaining for the judge, for the inquiry, in a very long statement, what Greenham was. They asked loads of questions, when I tried to explain that we were nonviolent activists, they said – well, but you cut fences and you disrupted roads, and you stopped people getting in and out of the base and things like that. And this has also come into our current lives because of incredibly draconian, increasingly heavy penalties being put onto climate activists nowadays here in the UK. And I want to give a little shout out to the Aldermaston Women’s Peace Camp which is still going, one weekend in every month, having been founded by three of us from Greenham, which actually is the major nuclear bomb factory in the UK, which took uranium from places like the Rossing mine during apartheid South Africa from Namibia and South Africa. As Marie-Claire spoke about yesterday, also uranium from the Congo ended up in the nuclear weapons. And the UK shamefully conducted 45 nuclear tests from 1952, and only stopped in 1991 when three Greenham women stopped a test at Ground Zero on Western Shoshone, indigenous First Nation people’s land in what is now called Nevada, on the Nevada test site, and Aldermaston women, Greenham women worked with Western Shoshone people about their issues, which also include nuclear waste dumping that continues to be done by the American government, and the contamination of their land despite the Ruby Valley treaty of the 1860s which gave them that land because the US government at that time didn’t think it was good for agriculture, but for the Western Shoshone nation, they were semi settled, semi nomadic and horses were an incredible part of their culture. This was the land stolen for the very early nuclear tests undertaken by the US government in 1945 and then carried on.

So, this kind of background is important to relate. I also therefore feel its important to own my own heritage; a lot of Women in Black know me, but they don’t necessarily know that I’m Anglo-Welsh Hutterian, Welsh-British born, youngest of eight children, born in a Hutterian Bruderhof, very strict, patriarchal, Christian, pacifist religious community in Shropshire on the Welsh-English borders. My early years were spent in a Hutterite colony, as they were called, on farms in North Dakota and Pennsylvania, US. Then my parents had to leave suddenly and only the youngest half of the children got taken to England. As I said, I was at Greenham for five years, and during that time, in 1985, I got close to Hagar Rublev at a conference in Amsterdam, went to Paris with her for a little while, and reconnected with her in Jerusalem in 1989 and went to my first ever Women in Black vigil there. This was my awakening to Women in Black, and then I got involved in Women in Black through Sian Jones and others taking part in Women’s Aid to Former Yugoslavia and meeting Lepa and Stasa in Women in Black Belgrade.

Since Greenham times I’ve been working on mostly disarmament treaties. I founded the Geneva office of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) in 2009, which mobilized around the world for a nuclear ban treaty which was finally negotiated and adopted by the UN General Assembly as the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, (the TPNW). Now I write quite a lot of forms of information, I do them as PowerPoint slides, I talk in a lot of different places about these issues, and I found it useful to put together the slides I do into little booklets about the different issues and tailor them towards that particular group, and I will send out after this, and maybe Sian can put it onto the international Women in Black website, the latest one which was for the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom. It has lots of information about the military-industrial connections that we’re talking about, with a British slant, but looking at the connections between climate destruction, nuclear destruction, from uranium going up to the waste, but also biodiversity and the risks of nuclear war, and of course humanities’ destruction in slightly slower motion nuclear war. But nevertheless, because of our climate destructivism. I will just read two small slides from that and then end this introduction. The first I want to read is this from Vandana Shiva, which is in one of the slides, because she’s one of my sheroes in the whole environmental movement. I’ve been fortunate enough to meet her, and we hoped that she would be able to be part of this panel, but unfortunately she can’t. This is what she wrote for the Extinction Rebellion handbook in 2019: ‘The extermination of biological diversity and of indigenous cultures that know how to live in peace with Mother Earth is part of one extinction. One interconnected war against life. Ecocide and genocide are one indivisible process, and they begin with the idea of the colonisation of the earth as the ‘civilisation or civilizing mission’ of a ‘superior race’. And we all know that that superiority has been exerted essentially by Europeans that at a certain time in their histories went into expanding their cultures, mostly Christianity that became a major role in what they perceived as ‘civilising’, exterminating peoples and cultures that had much longer civilisations than ever the Europeans had. But much more understanding, deep understanding, that humans were part of nature, part of the development, the evolution of animals and creatures and simply part of that, we’re not superior to anyone or any creature, we are part of that, interdependent and connected. And it’s in that context that we have to understand that these are interconnected and must be seen together. My booklet has a lot more, because my background is in Physics and stuff like that, but you can read that, I now want to finish here and open up to all of you, because I know how much wisdom there is in this room. And if you have questions, but please also your thoughts, try to say at least one thing that you think that you can do, or that we can do, put it on the table because there may be other groups here that go – oh yeah, I can do that in my country. Over to all of you – who would like to start?

**Yvette Abrahams (SA):** I just wanted to say what really resonated with me was Vandana Shiva, she was one of my really big sheroes, along with Wangaari Maathai and Eve Balfour, when I wanted to be an organic farmer rather than an academic, those are the three people that really inspired me to do it, and that’s what makes me feel young at 61. She’s absolutely right, I’ve been at the uranium mine in Namibia, and its nothing but a big slash in the ground. It’s a ghost town. And fortunately, thank you, you anti-nuclear activists, that mine got closed down because we probably would have seen very high cancer rates if it had not been. But it’s not just a big hole in the ground, it’s an open slash. It’s really painful to pass. And Springbok, where they dump nuclear waste, has very high rates of cancer. People keep on reporting it, we keep on pressing the government for investigation, and those health investigations never get published. Just in the spirit of Vandana Shiva, I wanted to mention that so you can see how international the struggle really is, that what you do matters in terms of our reality.

**Kath (UK):** I also feel deeply humble to be in this amazing group of women who have clearly got huge amounts of history and activity in the past. This may feel completely disconnected, but just in a small amount of hope, you’re quite right Rebecca that Christianity was a major part of colonialism and extraction but we are very lucky now in the Catholic church that Pope Francis has recognized that, and there is an all Christian commitment now and he is absolutely working with indigenous groups across the world and trying to make some recompense for the role of Christianity in the past, I think, in terms of that destruction, and we are all trying to raise awareness, get action, in particular we’re trying to mobilise people in the anti-fossil fuel proliferation campaign. I know it’s difficult to forgive us the sins of the past but there is huge activity across the world, I think that’s a big positive. And people who are already involved in church activities can link that with environmental activism across the world. We have a number of amazing seminars where we hear from indigenous groups and other communities. I think it has been really important in mobilizing, perhaps, a set of people who have not always seen that the earth is as important as the people.

**Jenny Engeldow (UK):** Hello, it’s brilliant to be here with you all because it’s just so stimulating and inspiring and it stops us feeling isolated. I mean, generally I’m not feeling isolated, but it stops a small group of people feeling, you know having our vigil and so on, it can feel sad that you’re not taking more of the community with you. I just wanted to say that the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, of which I’m a member, we created - in the climate justice group – an exhibition when COP (Conference Of the Parties, the main decision making body of the UN Convention on Climate Change) 26 or 27 was in Glasgow, and we made many copies and it has been shown in many cities around the country. There was also a booklet that people could take away, and it was available online. We’ve updated it, and it talks a lot about ecocide and the nuclear issue – both power and weapons. It also talks about the indigenous people who know the land, and how to work the land, rather than big corporations, which is what we see. Just as a small thing, locally, I live near the Downs – a sort of green belt of farmland – and it has been so overworked, they’ve ripped up so many of the trees, and the land and most of the soil have in many places been blown away, and it’s just chalk underneath. And you look at the land and you think ‘whatever’s going on there?’ And the chemicals that they use, and so on. We highlighted many of these issues and injustices and the colonialism that has taken place and continues in its various ways. We held that exhibition here in Brighton in a library and we’re coming up to COP 29, I think it is, and we’re talking about even at a simple level that people can just put a poster in their window, that we can design a poster that highlights these issues. Maybe it could be a changeable poster, so it’s on for a week or daily, just to try and communicate with local people, even if you can’t get out of your house and do something, that’s a minimum sort of thing that people might be able to do.

**Rebecca Johnson (UK):** Can you say a little bit more about the campaign that I know you were very central in, which was about challenging and getting lots of signatures to oppose the arms factory on the outskirts of Brighton, because I think that that’s also a really good example? And one of the things in my booklet that I haven’t talked so much about is that climate and environmental destruction are high security risks. All aspects of militarism are, the military boot print impact on the climate in every single country is very, very high, and in countries that are large arms producers, and/or at war, and those two things often go together, the countries that are the largest arms producers are more likely to be going to war and more likely to be developing nuclear weapons. These are all connected, and our feminist analysis really recognizes that militarism begins with cultures that equate masculinity with force, control, violence, and power over others. And that’s also the force that drives capitalism, and the profit motive, and the constant obsession with economies based on growth, growth, growth. But cancer is your own cells growing out of control. Growth is not intrinsically safe or good at all. If we listen to our own bodies we know that we have to have sustainable economies. So that’s also part of why go after local military construction, and military factories, and this particular one, as Jenny will tell you, has also an Israel armaments link.

**Jenny Engeldow (UK):** Yes, this is a factory known now as the L3 Harris, it used to be known as the EDO, because it has been there for many years and over the years there have been some very strong campaigns to try and get rid of it. Many people were in court for actions there, they had some brilliant actions going on, they had weekly vigils, they built a cage in the entrance way, and the anti-factory people were locked in that cage for days so they were blocking the entrance, they did many things there and ended up in court. In fact there was one point when they used something in court that had been done at Greenham as well, that they were trying to prevent a crime that was very great, and the judge – as it happened – agreed with them that their actions were to try and prevent disasters and deaths, and he actually let them off, which was wonderful. And then eventually he said, ‘I was actually born in Palestine’. Which was a lucky chance, but also just a really interesting outcome.

So, this factory had been there for several years, and about six years ago, they were given permission to build an extension. Now it ran out, and they hadn’t applied to make it permanent, so they applied. At that point we had a lever. I should also say that the land the factory is built on, this company are subtenants, the land is actually owned by the Council, which is our land, which gave us another lever. So, we had marches out there, we had vigils, we had signatures online, we had tables out in the street, we had leaflets, we had all sorts of demonstrations. We obviously approached the Council in a number of ways. The coalition brought many different groups together, and of course at this time, last Autumn, it coincided with what’s happening in Palestine. And some of the parts they make in that factory, they create bomb release mechanisms, and those bombs are the ones that are being used in the F16s and F35s on Palestine. So, we had all the people who have been objecting to what’s going on in Palestine, and it became a very big group of people. We had many meetings and all the rest of it, and one of the group is actually a professor who works on weapons and so on, and she also knows a great deal about the rules to do with land and buildings, so she was perfect, and she did so much work, she knew the language to use to actually undermine the Council’s position. And they couldn’t ignore it. It was a brilliant few months, it was so much work, and in the end, when it finally got to the Planning Committee, they actually rejected it. They said no, we can’t allow this to become permanent. So, they have to take that building down. Which was a wonderful day.

**Rebecca Johnson (UK):** A huge victory. Thank you Jenny, I just felt that the women here would really like to know, because that kind of nitty gritty thing you can do in a small town – Jenny’s been working here in Brighton for the last 40 years at least and is so connected with lots of other groups here and started Women in Black, as we said, in late October or early November last year. These examples, they matter, and they can succeed, and it’s really a powerful connection.

**Heena Thompson (UK):** Thank you both, Rebecca and Yvette, so interesting, and the example of South Africa having nuclear weapons, and now not, is inspirational to the world. And I’d be interested to know if you’ve got any suggestions or anything else of how South Affrica can continue to be a role model to get rid of weapons of mass destruction? I know, that’s a big question, isn’t it!And obviously Rebecca’s got a bit of work with TPNW (Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons) which you might share with others who might not be aware of the TPNW? And also to invite Yvette to talk about the amazing work that you do about planet earth, fragile home, in your daily life that affects local women, and some of the local connections that you have through farming and your amazing work near Cape Town. Thank you.

**Anna (UK):** Thank you very much to Rebecca and Jenny, and all that she has contributed to, and made me think what is happening, and how we can take everything forward, but also knowing what is happening sometimes I have become very anxious. I’m thinking to myself, Are we doing enough? Is it changing? Are the men listening to us? And my niece sent me a book called *Deep Equality* (2008) and I have started reading it, and it’s absolutely amazing. It's by Jocelyn Chaplin and she talks about feminism, as in deep equality, as interconnected, interdependent with the earth, and with all the activism that is going on. At the end of each chapter it explains what you can do to help yourself, and to find peace within yourself as well, so that that peace can be radiated into your activism. I really recommend this book.

**Liz Khan (UK):** I just wanted to make a connection to the previous Women in Black conference that we had where the women in Armenia talked about the devastation of their forests from what was a really short war, it only lasted several months didn’t it, between Azerbaijan and Armenia. You look at that and think about the devastation from the weapons used there, and then you wonder, what devastation will there be for any of the survivors in Gaza, in terms of the land that is left for farming or for living on? I did just want to say to Yvette that it has been amazing news to hear about South Africa refusing to have, or dismantling, nuclear weapons, that’s showing us the way forward, thank you Yvette.

**Rebecca Johnson (UK):** Yvette, how did South Africa get rid of its nuclear weapons?

**Yvette Abrahams (SA)**: I can’t remember if we ever had nuclear weapons, what we had was a ‘peaceful’ nuclear energy programme for the production of energy that was brought in by the National Party. But I’m convinced that there’s no such thing as a peaceful use of nuclear energy. The technology was military in its origin, and of course as long as we had the nuclear programme, there were always moves to say – oh and we could make bombs also. Lots of the uranium from the Rossing mine in Namibia was exported for bombs. So generally I think the only way to avoid nuclear weapons is to ban the technology outright. How we did it? Well one of my strongest arguments with the millionaires was the cost argument. Because as you know, nuclear power is uninsurable worldwide. You can’t insure it because although the risk of an accident happening is relatively low, when an accident does happen, the expenses are so large that no single insurance company can cover it. As you know, I’m an economic historian by training, so I did that, and unfortunately in 2017, when Fukushima happened, we were able to show that the Japanese government had to raise taxes by 2-5%, purely to cover the costs of Fukushima and the clean-up. And that is even without the amounts they couldn’t clean up, you know - nuclear radioactivity started showing up in fish outside Los Angeles, and these were the global effects. And of course there are continuing high cancer rates. So that was the kind of thing that worked with millionaires, because they are businessmen. And we were, like, well who’s insuring this?

In South Africa there was a government insurance guaranteed by the National Party. But we’ve never found that fund, we have no idea what’s happened to that money, and so if anything should happen to our one existing power station then we would probably have to do the same thing as the Japanese and do it like a tax on every South African. So that’s kind of, speak to people in a language they understand, when you talk to millionaires, talk about money because they don’t give a ketootle about safety aspects or pacifism or anything else. What’s happened to our one existing nuclear station, it used to be beach. But then in the early 90s beach front property became very popular and it’s now a playground for very rich people. So when you work out the insurance costs, if that one nuclear power station were to do a Fukushima, if it were to go kablooi, we’re talking about again easily trillions of Rands worth of real estate. And that is the one argument that seems to succeed. They’ve just refurbished that one nuclear power station and apparently it’s good to go till 2040 now, which is quite sad. But like I say, our aim is that by the time 2040 comes that nuclear has been so phased out that there are absolutely no plans to build another one.

**Rebecca Johnson (UK):** I also have a bit to add, actually the Apartheid government did have nuclear weapons, they had six, and they kept updating them. They did it in a huge hangar that could not be viewed as a nuclear weapons base at all. There was one mysterious flash in 1979, I think, in the South Atlantic, not very far from South Africa, that has always been ‘rumoured’ – and I think there’s quite a lot of evidence – that it was a joint Israeli-South African nuclear test that showed up from space, from satellites etc. but has never been admitted to. South Africa did admit to having its nuclear weapons only when they got rid of apartheid. So it was your struggle in South Africa against apartheid that actually forced South Africa to get rid of nuclear weapons. We in countries like the UK and many other countries were part of the anti-apartheid movements had a lot of connections with the ANC people who were in asylum in London. We worked very closely together, I shared a lot of platforms with them, and so when I went into doing the whole diplomacy thing, as apartheid was collapsing, I worked on banning nuclear tests first. South Africa was dismantling its nuclear weapons and I began to get to know some of the diplomats, as you said, the majority of them were white, but they were increasingly bringing in young black civil servants to be trained and learn the ropes. But the Ambassador was always Black, after apartheid ended, and Ambassador Selebi and I worked quite closely on the CTB, the Comprehensive Test Ban, and then he was replaced by Ambassador Joyce (I can never pronounce her surname right) but she was a very close friend and she knew all about my background, she was Ambassador to the UN. We worked very closely, so when we started to have the strategy to ban all nuclear weapons with some sort of nuclear ban Treaty, South Africa was one of the first countries that we approached. Desmond Tutu very early on made statements in public, just like the Pope as well, as Kath spoke about. We started with South Africa which didn’t have nuclear weapons, but knew how you made them, which of course meant they knew how to get rid of them, knew how you dismantled, knew all those complexities.

So South Africa was central to the negotiations and achievement of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons which was concluded in 2017 and entered into force in 2021. South Africa really helped to absolutely teach what needed to be taught, but without violating another treaty, the Nonproliferation Treaty, about how you would verify nuclear weapons. And there’s actually, within the Treaty, two options for how the nuclear weapons armed states can get rid of their weapons, and one of them is to get rid of the nuclear weapons and then call in the verifiers, the International Atomic Energy Agency, but also the verification regime that we are building, where South Africa is again absolutely at the forefront of the building of verification regime and institutions for implementing the Treaty. So why this is important is because the nuclear armed states, and all but one of the NATO countries, boycotted those negotiations, but they couldn’t say that we didn’t know what we were talking about. Because South Africa knows exactly what needs to be done. One of the clauses was, you could get a country like the UK, for example, choose to have a decision to start dismantling and getting rid of the nuclear weapons, and at a certain point maybe even South Africa completed that process and then invited the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to verify it. The UK could start the dismantling process, start moving Aldermaston, the nuclear bomb factory, more and more towards the skills of dismantling and verification of warheads, which they know how to do because they do it all the time, they dismantle them and then they rebuild them. So they know. That’s exactly what South Africa used to do. The UK knows exactly how to do those things. They could do it themselves, then at a certain point invite the IAEA to verify it, and also the regime for the new Treaty, in together to verify and work together. In fact, they can start working together with the Treaty as observers, even before they sign the Treaty. Or they can sign the Treaty first, and then they’ve got all the assistance that is being built up through the Treaty to do this safely and securely. So those two choices are there, and the choice of getting rid first, or beginning to get rid first, is always called the South African option, we call it, it’s not publicly called that in the Treaty. This was the history there.

But the other thing I just want to remind everyone of is that there’s the uranium mining of course. The reason why the Rossing mine is so destructive. It’s just a hole in the ground, but it’s a highly, highly toxic hole in the ground, not only in terms of radioactivity, but in terms of heavy metals. And this is the problem that Marie-Claire is highlighting and dealing with, primarily in Eastern DRC, which is that where these new green minerals are found is often in close connection with Bauxite, which is where uranium is found, and it’s not just about the associated radioactivity, it’s also about the incredible toxicity that harms unborn children. The younger a child is who lives nearby, they get more harmed, and also women are disproportionately harmed by all aspects of heavy metal, toxic and radioactive contamination. There’s a really big, statistically significant difference between women and men, girls and boys in this because of our biological differences. And this is not often understood, but we actually put this recognition into the preamble to that Treaty. And we also put in the heavy load of harm to indigenous people. Any questions?

**Sue Finch (UK):** Thank you! Thinking about the Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, we all need to lobby our governments to make sure that they have signed, could you help? I think not every government has signed, including our own, and wondered, who at this meeting knows if their government has signed it or not. Do you all know? (show of hands) No, I think not..

**Rebecca Johnson (UK):** I can tell you that 93 countries around the world have signed. The UK is not one of them, India is not one of them. These countries are still pursuing nuclear weapons, and – let’s face it – pursuing nuclear power as well. Nuclear weapons and nuclear power are inextricably linked. This is absolutely why it’s so wrong to think that there’s any peaceful use of nuclear other than medical. I do want to say that medical can be made in laboratories attached to a hospital, they take the tiniest amount, and the waste from them is incredibly small, nothing like the level of waste from any nuclear power generation, nuclear energy generation. So, I think we can still keep the technologies for medical, because I don’t think we have any technologies that can replace those. But that can be done very safely, in small quantities, and still has to be looked after, at the level of waste, but the level of waste is extremely small and we can find ways to deal with those tiny levels of waste.

None of the nuclear armed states, of which there are nine, has yet joined. Some NATO countries have come along and observed, but they have been told by the US, and the UK, and France - the nuclear armed NATO countries – and we’ll hear more about that in a further session this afternoon – that they must not sign, which is outrageous, this is a UN Treaty, negotiated in the UN General Assembly. But it’s a Treaty that the so-called Nuclear 5, P5 some call it, the permanent members of the UN General Assembly, cannot veto. It was done in the General Assembly to be open to all states to negotiate. And over 140 states participated during the negotiations in 2017. And 122 voted for the Treaty on the last day, with only one abstaining, and one, the NATO state Netherlands, had at least defied NATO to negotiate, but then they voted against. So, this is the Global South uniting, frankly, because this was a Treaty that we strategized to do in the forum of the UN that could not be prevented. Open to all, and blockable by none, and this has since become a model for doing humanitarian and disarmament treaties. So these are connections in with this, and Sue is right, we have to get our own countries to do it, and the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN <https://www.icanw.org> ) has enormous amounts of information on all of the states, and the status of whether they’ve signed, whether they observe, whether they haven’t started etc. It most recently has a lot of information on the costs for each country, and I can certainly send those out to the international WiB list, I know Lieve is here and she would happily forward something that has lots of those links. So ICAN has a huge amount of resources, I worked through lockdown on one which is called ‘NUCLEAR WEAPONS ARE BANNED! WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR BRITAIN?’ looking at my country and basically making an argument for why it is in our security, as well as planetary and health, economic and every other interest to actually get rid of the nuclear weapons and join this Treaty. And I’m looking forward to updating this when I get a moment and tailoring it for the new government that has now come in. And since my MP is Technology Minister I’m going to make an early appointment with him to talk about how they can contribute to verification, even if they haven’t signed. I will try to communicate more about this after we finish this online conference. Corinne, did you have something to say?

**Corinne Kumar (India)**: Thank you Rebecca, and thank you Yvette, you have become my heroes today, our sheroes if you like. You talked about Vandana and so many other women also, who have been working on this Disarmament Movement. Here in India we’ve called it the Anti-nuclear, the Anti-nuclear waste, and the Nuclear Power for Peaceful Purposes, as Yvette you have said. All you need is the political will. Then the same kind of uranium that is processed for peaceful purposes can be created for that. But I also wanted to tell you of the other kind of stories on nuclear waste, and I’m thinking of my side of the world, in the Pacific Ocean where this little island of Rongelap was like any other island, full of palm trees, full of joy, full of laughing and singing, and the children always went out to play. They played in the sun, and they played all kinds of games. One day, white powdery flakes began to fall out of the sky. And the children, who had never seen snow said ‘This is snow’ and they romped and they played in the ‘snow’. Then a few hours later US helicopters came over Rongelap and told the children that they had to go inside, because the snow was poison. A little one year old child who was caught in that ‘snow’, played in that ‘snow’ suffered thyroid abnormalities, different kinds of cancers, all kinds of things. A few years after Hiroshima and Nagasaki everyone knew that the oxygen was used there for the nuclear bomb. But this nuclear bomb was a hydrogen bomb, and the US wanted to test it. Not on their own people, not anywhere near them, but in the Pacific. They tested it in the Pacific, and then they started to tell stories about how sorry they were because the direction of the wind had changed, and this is what brought the nuclear fallout to Rongelap. 25 years later there was a US Marine who spoke out and said there was no question of the wind changing, they wanted to test, to know the effects of the hydrogen bomb. It was a very deliberate act. What was the hydrogen bomb? What are the effects of the hydrogen bomb? People have gone back. They asked so much for some kind of treatment, for some kind of recognition of what really happened. They were not told anything. But some people were taken for testing in the US. I think they still test the children there, the children who are now grown up. He was only one year old then, but when I heard the story, he was already many years after that, 19 or 20. And now he will be an older person, much older. What I’m trying to say is that nuclear waste today is a huge problem because, as you said Rebecca and Yvette, they do not know how to get rid of it. And when yesterday I heard Marie-Claire talking about uranium and she’s very right when she said, ‘What are all these other effects of the nuclear bomb?’ No-one is going to take this away from us, no Treaties, no governments, no nothing. They may sign many things, but nothing is going to change. We’ve seen this for the last 50 years. You know I’m very old now compared to all of you, I’m going to be 80 next year. Don’t laugh, but it’s true. I’m still working with Vimochana, I love my work, and can work remotely, and what I said to them now is you have to let me go, because everyone thinks you’re mad. They always used to say that I’m crazy. I am mad. But now they think Vimochana is crazy. So anyway I also want you to tell us about Sarah Baartman, Yvette, because I think you said it so quickly and in passing, I wish you would tell us the story of Sarah Baartman. Thank you.

**Rebecca Johnson (UK):** Thank you so much Corinne, I do love you! Thank you so much for talking about Rongelap, that was my awakening to understand what war crimes all of the nuclear countries had been doing on the lands of indigenous peoples. When I was at Greenham some Australian women came and they were just so horrified that we didn’t talk about or know about the crimes of the UK against the indigenous people of the Pacific and also of the aboriginal First Nation peoples of Australia. And we raised money and brought those women over, and Lijong was one of those children who played in what she thought was snow in 1954, with that huge bomb, so-called Bikini, and were forcibly removed from their homeland. So she came and she spoke and I was so utterly horrified and so utterly changed by what I heard. That’s why when I left Greenham I started trying to ban nuclear testing. And a couple of months ago I met her grandson Benedict who came to a conference I was speaking at in Berlin on feminist foreign policy, organized by the Feminist Foreign Policy Unit in Berlin, and he was one of the speakers, and it was so amazing to connect with her grandson, he is such an amazing campaigner. I had met him at ICAN meetings and he’s a wonderful speaker and brilliant campaigner against nuclear testing for the Treaty, but also champion of the nuclear free and independence rights of the Pacific peoples, not only against nuclear weapons but against colonialism. I’ll turn to Yvette to talk about Sarah:

**Yvette Abrahams (SA)**: Thank you so much Corinne, and of course you know that you are the reason I say that I am only 61, I don’t have to retire from activism quite yet! But the more so because you mentored me in lost causes. I mean, if I think about the issues that you’ve raised in your life that, to begin with, appeared completely crazy, and through years of work you somehow brought them into the mainstream, and before you know it we have things like the Japanese government apologizing for the use of Korean Comfort Women, or any other of the hundreds of issues and the 400 we actually achieved victory in. So that’s why I say my whole activist life, of which I’ll have many years left, you are my role model – there’s nothing too crazy for someone who has been mentored by Corinne! Thank you also for mentioning the hydrogen bombs, I’ll get back to this in a second. But Rebecca, thank you also for teaching us, because I actually did not know that we ever had nuclear weapons. As I said, I came into this in the 2000s for a very specific purpose, and a very specific strategic campaign. But thank you for teaching me about my own country. And I suppose what it raises for me is the ways in which we first had to be liberated as South Africa before we could do anything about nuclear, whether peaceful or armed, and the implications I think that has for all of us. I certainly think that in terms of climate change, probably 80-90% of what we have to do has to happen at local level, whether it’s rainwater tanks or worm farms or regenerative agriculture or tree planting. So how powerful do we have to be at local or regional level to make that kind of impact?

Thank you, Corinne for mentioning the hydrogen, because there’s that wing of the climate change movement that’s basically dominated by white men who are saying well, we can find a technical solution for climate change, and then we don’t really have to change. And their big thing is hydrogen, and I’m wondering if we can make some of the same parallels between hydrogen and hydrogen bombs as we are making between ‘peaceful’ nuclear and nuclear weapons. So, thanks for opening that up, because I have been a little skeptical of this whole hydrogen thing, precisely because it doesn’t force us to change the system. You know, let’s just sit with patriarchy and capitalism and all of that intact, or at least that’s the technological promise. But I’m always suspicious of technological solutions to what are essentially political problems.

So, Sarah Baartman – she was born in the Eastern Cape in South Africa, like I said, in that exact river valley where they wanted to put a nuclear power station, go figure. She lost almost all her family in a very early genocidal war, the 1799 – 1802 war in the Eastern Cape, one of the colonial wars, and then came to Cape Town as a slave and from here was taken to Britain, where she was exhibited. Like I said, she was a dancer, a singer, a guitarist, she was a poet, but both in Britain and in France she was seen very much as a symbol of savagery. It links to all the very strange stereotypes about the Khoisan, the most popular one being that we were the missing link between humans and animals, so there was a certain scientific curiosity about Sarah Baartman as an actual member of these people that were supposed to be half animal, half human. But we brought her home eventually, in 2002, we buried her. The government has almost finished building a huge museum cultural centre, and I was very busy there last year doing some preliminary research for the inaugural exhibitions. As soon as that is done, I will invite all of you to come and stand with us at the Sarah Baartman Cultural Centre and look over her birthplace and just generally celebrate. There’s lots of hard work, but we do win victories. When we look at our lives in the whole 80-year life span you can se that we have actually come very far compared to where we started.

**Rebecca Johnson (UK):** Thankyou Yvette. One of the fundamental things is that militarism creates climate destruction, and climate destruction creates further wars. They’re so inextricably linked, and nuclear is part of militarism. But it is also not a solution in any way. Nuclear technology is not a solution for climate destruction. So, this is the starting point that we really have to understand and recognize in everything that we do. We have a banner at the Aldermaston Peace Camp that says pretty much just that. That’s the first thing. Then we heard from Jenny, and this is the second takeaway I’m going to give, which is: look locally and nationally for where crimes against our planet are being committed. Who is committing them? Crimes against our planet. Crimes against peace. Crimes against the environment. Crimes against humanity. We are all responsible for looking at what is going on and then doing our best to highlight that. And as we heard from Jenny, we can highlight that locally, and it will amplify. We can look at a local factory that makes arms, that makes parts of weapons, and link it to the wars where those weapons are being used – in Brighton’s case, the war on Gaza. And this is something you can do, connect up with the climate and the anti-nuclear and the pro-diversity and the clean food movements, because there’s a lot, and support each other if the State clamps down, as it increasingly is in many countries, on activists, and arrests them and in some cases gives them prison sentences. And the final takeaway that I’m just going to say is the one that Sue raised, which is yes, get your countries to sign up. As I said, there are 93 countries that have signed, but they haven’t all actually ratified yet. The last time I looked I think there were at least 20 who’ve signed but not ratified. So look on the ICAN website, and if they’re your country, encourage them to ratify. A leader of a country can sign, but ratification is often a process of the Parliament, or something like that, so you have to encourage the Parliament to do those parts of it. Find out what is the process, and who to reach out to there. But also look on the ICAN website and look at the money, the waste. Trillions upon trillions of whatever currency of all the nuclear weapon states are being wasted on nuclear weapons and ICAN posts that up on the website for the nine nuclear armed states. (<https://www.icanw.org> )

Don’t call them nuclear weapon states because that gives them that status that makes them feel ‘Oh yes, we’re the big states, we’re the important states’. Don’t call them the nuclear powers either, because the power has to be, and is being, transferred to the nuclear free and independent countries. They are the countries that negotiated and brought the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons into fruition. It exists now in international law, just like every other Treaty that’s existed, and no matter how much your country might say ‘Oh, but it’s like an NGO Treaty, it’s not a real Treaty’ – yes it is, it’s a real Treaty. It has meetings of states’ parties, either in places like Vienna where they do verification things, or the UN in New York, and the next meeting of states’ parties will be in 2025. So, encourage your country again. I will try to be better at sending out a lot more information to the Women in Black international list to alert you to some of these, I’ve been very derelict this past year, and I apologise for that. So there’s a lot to be done there, to make these connections, support each other and your climate activists, even if you yourself feel that you can’t. And finally, as everybody keeps saying in the chat, and love you all for saying this, when Corinne said she’s 80 next year and ought to retire – activists never retire! And up to a point I think that’s true, we can always find a way to keep being part of the activism, even as we hand over some of the major tasks to the next generation, or they take them from us in some cases, but we work together. We can work together, like Extinction Rebellion and ICAN, mostly now led by younger generation, and led often by women, and men also together. And that’s a good thing too. But never forget feminist nonviolence, as I had to explain to the Spycops inquiry, is not a passive thing at all. Feminist nonviolence is about actively disrupting, actively opposing all aspects of violence and militarism, as well as war. And isn’t that what Women in Black have always done since Hagar and other women in Jerusalem founded it, and it got taken up out around the world, that is who we are, and we’re feminist nonviolence, and we’re not afraid to find ways to say that we have a right also to look after ourselves and defend ourselves against violence. Now I’m handing over to Yvette for the last words.

**Yvette Abrahams (SA):** Thank you Rebecca, I’ve got very little to add to that very comprehensive summing up, which I think gives us very clear outlines to the way forward. I guess the only thing that I want to address that came up in the discussion was the issue around mining. And I want to talk about that because I don’t think it’s something that comes up clearly enough, it doesn’t get said loudly enough, which is that as an African the thought of using a piece of land in such a way that it cannot be used by the next generation, and the generation after that, that wasn’t even in our cosmology at the time of colonisation. So we had minds very similar to the sort of pre-feudal minds you had in Britain. We’d scratch a little silver out to the top of the ground, you know a little gold or copper, but this was a continent that was so rich that even my grandfather will tell you about finding diamonds on the ground when he was a child. Things were so freely available that this sort of deep mining, or these three-kilometer-deep mines that we have today, was not on our radar. And very much I feel that one of the reasons that Netanyahu wants to continue the war in Palestine is simply so he doesn’t have to confront the aftermath of reparations and damages, and being held to account. I think in the same way it feels like Western culture does not want to stop mining because they don’t want to confront the question of what are we going to do with the land now that you are done with it? Now that you’ve hauled all the gold out, or all the coal, how do we repair this piece of land so that future generations can use it? And you know the short answer, as I understand from the science, is that there isn’t a way. But I encourage anybody who does this to try and get into mine reclamation. There are very few answers and all of them are bad. It basically boils down to, do we concentrate the toxicity all in one place, so that that particular village will never be able to go home forever, their descendants will never be able to? Or do we spread the toxicity around in places so that we all get a little bit of it? None of those are good answers. But I’m just raising this point so before we kind of open up the next mine I hope there’s a strong contingent of women saying ‘Just stop here and explain how are you going to repair this damage that you are doing to the planet? How are you going to make amends for this violence against us?’ Because at this point we still don’t have answers. We have deep gashes, deep wounds in the land and no answers. That’s my next 20 years of activism!

**Session 8 : The Contextualisation of the Women Peace and Security agenda in the Great Lakes, Horn and Sahel regions of Africa 2.9.24**

**Facilitators**: **Marie-Claire Faray (DRCongo) and Marie-Lyse Numuhoza (Rwanda), Speakers: Kongosi Mussanzi (DRCongo but now living in UK), Zeinab Burma Hussein (Sudan), Dr Sarah Ogbay (Eritrea).**

This session explored the challenges and highlighted women’s resistance to dehumanisation from Armed Extractivism and Violence in the Great Lakes, Horn and Sahel regions of Africa.

**Marie-Lyse Numuhoza (Rwanda):** Good afternoon, everyone, it’s great to be with all of you today. I’m originally from Rwanda and have been working with Marie-Claire for a long time, I’m so glad to be part of this amazing session and overall conference. I’ve been living in the UK for over 20 years and have worked on different activities and projects and today we are here to share this session on the contextualisation of the Women, Peace and Security agenda in the Great Lakes, Horn and Sahle regions of Africa together with Marie-Claire and the other sisters from Africa. Today we are going to hear from four women representing those regions of Africa and they will be sharing how the UN Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security is difficult to implement in conflict affected areas, despite most countries having worked on National Action Plans.

The voices that you are going to hear today are mainly women from the grassroots, sharing the challenges of war and conflict, as well as highlighting their journeys, their resilience and determination in finding ways to achieve peace and security, mainly human security rather than military security. I’m going to hand over to you, Marie-Claire, to give us the background and guide us through the seminar.

**Marie-Claire Faray (DRCongo)**: Thank you very much. I’m joining you from Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo. I’m actually a research scientist by training, but I am a survivor of gender-based sexual violence, and I have worked for over 25 years advocating and promoting women’s agency, and women’s peace and security, particularly the implementation of the Maputo Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa and looking at women, peace and security in Africa. At the moment I am a Director of the DRC Centre for Women, Peace and Security which was established here in 2021 to contextualise the Women, Peace and Security agenda. First of all I would like to start by talking to you as my sisters, as human beings, because as a scientist myself I was involved during the time when the human genome was sequenced and published, and I just want to state first of all that one of the things that is very difficult is that all of us share the same genetic makeup, all human beings are 99.9% identical in their genetic make-up, and we must realise that we are all human, and nobody is superior to anybody, and nobody is inferior, and that sexism and racism are often two sides of the same coin of oppression and exploitation. Africa is not a country, because so many people want to look at Africa as a homogenous group. It’s actually extremely heterogeneous groups, with different civilisations, different cultures, and it’s so rich and diverse, but at the same time the women in Africa are sharing the same plight as women all over the world.

Unfortunately, because of the war, and displacement, people have been dehumanized. The voices of women in Africa are never, ever heard appropriately, particularly grassroots women, those who are in displaced areas. Look at Sudan, with seven million forcibly displaced people, these are figures that came out at the end of last year and beginning of this year, and the Congo - seven million, Somalia – five million displaced because of war, because of violence, because of a problem that mining creates environmental disaster, and armed groups. The most displaced are in the Sahel region, the Horn of Africa, and the Great Lakes Area, which is actually central Africa where you have countries where there’s extensive war. And we are doing some research with the Acronym Institute for Disarmament Diplomacy looking at the dehumanising impact of small arms and light weapons in the Congo, because a lot of people think that there’s only war in the East of Congo, but it is affecting actually the whole of the region. The Congo has nine neighbours, so there is impact in the countries to the West and to the East.

What we have been looking at is this, that the lives of Black people do not matter in Africa, and does not matter worldwide. Africa is still being partitioned, it’s still being carved, because we have a lot of resources, because the so-called indigenous resources here you can find anywhere else, when we talk about oil, gold and all this - you name it - you can find it in Canada, you can find it in America, you can find it everywhere. But there is cheap labour, slavery, in Africa, people are under slavery and oppression so that they could continue to mine, and they’ve actually made it a policy to promote Africa as a land of resources, whereas there are resources everywhere, in Australia, in Europe there are resources, however they don’t want to use their resources, they want to come here to Africa because they are enslaving people, children, and get all these resources for free, so that all the countries, particularly Western countries, some of those countries at the UN Security Council, can continue to benefit from the labour of Black Africans.

So, if you look at the arms in those regions, many of those countries are heavily and extremely militarized and most of those who are providing weapons are sitting at the UN Security Council, particularly the USA, the UK, China and Russia, and France of course. So, the UN has passed all these resolutions, what is the significance for us as African women, particularly from the Great Lakes, Sahel and Horn of Africa regions? The countries are militarised, war everywhere, coup d’etats, anti-constitutional power, injustice, violence. Even when you look at UN women, they come in here, UNIFEM international agencies, they are coming with their own structure and projects for African women, and it’s actually labelling African women like they lack agency, and stereotyping women, but actually they are doing large violence. We have organisations such as NDI (National Democratic Institute) from the US coming here, training women in Africa, and particularly in Central Africa, bringing patriarchal and violent masculine policy, giving examples such as Hilary Clinton and Marilyn Albright and all these women who are using patriarchy to access power. Who are the people bringing in arms here? The US, Russia.

Looking at the leadership across Central Africa, most of them high extractivism, military coups, military junta and all of those countries have National Action Plans, but if you look at the Human Development Index, most of them are rated very low, and if you look at the Women, Peace and Security Index, most of them – very low. But you look at the arms circuit, and some of them have a programme on controlling smaller light weapons, they have it at the regional, the local and the provincial levels, but none of it is implemented because the arms are still coming in. If you look at Sudan, look at who’s bringing arms there! Look at China, look at Ethiopia, the DRC, Rwanda. So, we’ve been looking at all this, and the main thing is, we’re looking at an older generation of dictators in Africa who are breeding a new generation of dictators, and some of them life Presidents. They have been supported by the West world, and you know they have illegitimacy, illegality, crime and impunity, and if you can see Kagami has been elected in East Africa with so-called 99%, and the UK’s applauding. I mean, when Putin was elected in Russia with that percentage, the whole media was talking about dictatorship. But for Kagami, for Museveni in Uganda, for the President of Eritrea, for all these dictators, they are applauding them, and they are supporting them. Well, we have this older generation of dictators, in Sahel, in Burkina Faso, you have many, in Niger a military one. While we, the African women, are bearing the brunt of all this war, and the Security Council is sitting there writing this new policy that the Secretary General has written on the new Peace Deal and talking about Women, Peace and Security while we are living in total insecurity in our countries. And they have been showing us a portrait of participation of women in the police, in the UN Peacekeeping Mission, however, they are not helping to prevent violence against women, because of war – any type of war. They’re saying that we have to end sexual violence in conflict. How can you end sexual violence in conflict, because conflict itself is violence? We have conflicts over all areas, and as long as the conflicts and war are being supported, warlords, illicit trade, illegal ways of coming to power, there will be no implementation of the Women, Peace and Security agenda. And we are resisting conflict in every way that is possible. I’m going to give the floor to my sister from Sudan,

**Marie-Lyse Numuhoza (Rwanda):** Just to highlight that UN Security Council Resolution 1325 is driven by four themes of participation, prevention, protection, and relief and recovery. You just heard the challenges that Marie-Claire highlighted that African women and countries are currentlyfacing, especially those in conflict, affecting women mainly because women are the majority on the African continent. How will they participate when they are living in refugee camps? How are they protected when they keep being uprooted day after day after day? What are the measures that have been taken to prevent their suffering? To prevent their kids from running from one place to another to facilitate their education? What are the relief and recovery approaches that have been used to protect these women, these women and their children? The next stage that we are going to is case studies from some countries in the areas that we have highlighted to show you how women at the grassroots level are trying to organize themselves to protect, to participate, to find ways for relief and recovery as well, in their own right, without relying on then governments that are failing them over and over again. I would like to introduce my sister Zeinab Fadlalla Burma, she’s from Sudan and graduated in economics and international relations from Schiller International University in London. Zeinab is a Sudanese activist committed to peace and human rights. She has worked extensively in Sudan, the UK and internationally, and she’s a member of various significant peace organisations in Africa, the USA, and Europe. She is currently Director of *Sudanese Mothers of Peace,* an NGO with operations in both Sudan and the UK, affiliated with *WILPF - the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom – UK.* I would just like you to know that since 1987, in the efforts led by the organisation’s founder the late Mama Khadiga Hussein - Zeinab’s mother, may she rest in peace, the Sudanese Mothers for Peace work focusses on achieving a peaceful resolution to Sudan’s conflict and realising the dream of creating an international Pan African Women’s Centre for education empowerment, that’s the vision that the organisation strives to fulfill. So welcome Zeinab and please share with us all the great work that you are doing, both in your country and abroad:

**Zeinab Fadlalla Burma (Sudan):** Thank you everybody**,** and I’m so happy to be among all of you, and to hear about the great work you have all been doing. As you know, I’m from Sudan and we’ve been having a war since April 2023. The country was on a bumpy road to democracy after the uprising in 2019. I’m sure all of you heard about how the Sudanese people had a dictatorship for more than 30 years and we managed to overthrow a government, let’s say Omar al-Bashir, that was destroying the country completely. The ongoing fighting between the Rapid Support Forces (the RSF), and the Sudanese Armed Forces has made it the site of one of the worst humanitarian crises. And the current conflict in Sudan has had a devastating impact on people, particularly women and girls.

The violence has reversed progress, the move towards democracy and stability, leaving the nation instead suffering a bad humanitarian disaster. Sudanese women and girls are the ones who are paying the price. The country is facing one of the largest displacement crises in the world, as Marie-Claire just mentioned. Unfortunately, 53% of those displaced are women and girls. There is also a rising risk that displacement will soon lead to the worst hunger crisis. *Sudanese Mothers for Peace* and all other organisations we are trying to be involved in the peace talks that are going on in Geneva. We and all the women in Sudan n are calling for a stop to the war and asking the two fighting groups to sit down and for dialogue to end this violence, and this war. Immediate action is needed to protect women and girls, support their economic empowerment, and include them in peace negotiations and decision making. We argue all the international partners and donors should invest more in local women’s organisations and to give them some resources to address the gender discrimination within this country. The *Sudanese Mothers for Peace* and other organisations in Sudan are calling for peace and the restoration of democracy, and involvement in the peace process. But unless we have this war stopped, and the violence in Sudan stopped, we can’t have anything. We can’t talk about peace and security or all these international agreements that we want to implement in Sudan unless this war is stopped. Unless all the international organisations help us to stop this war, we cannot do anything else. People are really suffering, and we cannot see any light. So I hope we can work together to find a way to stop this war. And maybe we can learn from other experiences, like my sister Marie-Claire, where they’ve been suffering from years and years of continuous war in their country. I just contacted her so we can work together so we can see what she’s been doing in her country so we can do the same, where it’s been successful, in Sudan. And I’m really glad to be with all of you and to learn from your experience of how we can work together to stop these humanitarian disasters. I’m really happy, and I hope to continue working with all of you. Thank you very much.

**Marie-Lyse Numuhoza (Rwanda):** Thank you, thank you so much Zeinab. Thank you for giving us the current situation in Sudan, but most importantly, how women in Sudan are organising, and they are also trying to find the way to the table where those peace negotiations are held. This really shows us the resilience, the determination of the women. But the question here is that the women are ready. The women want to participate. What is stopping the international community and other organisations to give them a space at the table, to enable them to heal their community, because all the women in the community know that their role is to drive for peace, to drive for protection and well-being of their families and the people around them. So women are ready, but we have to continue to call for that space, for that voice at the international table where the women from the grassroots voices would be heard. We’ll move on to our next speaker, Dr Sarah Ogbay, co-founding member of the *Network of Eritrean Women,* as well as an academic and an activist, with a Doctoral degree from Lancaster University. She has worked at different academic institutions and co-published chapters on language, technology, human traffickers and Eritrean women. Dr Sarah is currently affiliated with the University of Manchester where she is working as a language assessor, and she has also represented the *Network of Eritrean Women* at different national and international conferences and workshops. Sarah has worked in different organisations as a community representative and as a professional interpreter for many psychologists and medical professionals. She has also worked as a trained peer supporter for domestic abuse victims. Welcome, Dr Sarah.

**Dr Sarah Ogbay (Eritrea):** Thank you very much Marie-Lyse, and all the organisers for giving me this opportunity to say a few words on the situation of Eritrean women and the peace there. Let me say a few words on the *Network of Eritrean Women*. The *Network of Eritrean Women* is a registered, non-profit organization whose mission is to defend and empower Eritrean women from the operative political, social, economic and cultural discrimination and practices that harm women. It strives to promote human rights and gender equity and social justice in Eritrea and even across the globe. The *Network of Eritrean Women* is a member of WILPF and has brought the plight of Eritrean women to the attention of CEDAW ((the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women) and the United Nations Human Rights Council. We also campaign for the freedom of mothers and girls, many of whom were under-age when they were detained incommunicado.

Ladies and sisters, since the liberation of Eritrea in 1991 there has never been an election. There is no rule of law. No freedom of speech. And there is Government sponsored, gross abuse of human rights that has been researched and registered by the United Nations Human Rights Council Special Reporter. People are arbitrarily detained for years and decades incommunicado, without a day in court. Young people are not allowed to dream of moving around the country without the permission of the Government. In Eritrea it is a rare blessing to see a family intact with their father, a mother and teenage children. The Government has attacked this basic and natural unit of society by plucking every teenager from the family and sending them to a mandatory military service that has no ending, and no pay. This started in 1993/4. So, you can imagine how old the first people who went to this national service are, because it’s endless. The people who went in the first round are now in their late forties and early fifties, without pay, without any dream, working as slaves without pay. As if this is not enough, also we have 40–65-year-old men to be taken as militias as well. So this has put the burden of raising a society squarely on women. Women are left at home with no income to raise children, who will also be conscripted when they get into their teens. In such situations it is difficult for the country to meet the global sustainable goals. To escape from this, families marry off their daughters when they are in their early teens, when they are under-age. They marry them to young men who are either on national service, or will enter national service, leaving their daughters alone with their children to look after, or pregnant, since they can only avoid compulsory military service if they are pregnant. What’s worse is that those young girls who go to the national service are sexually abused, raped and enslaved by the military brass. Their only way out is to be demobilised is they have to get pregnant. So they deliberately get pregnant by anyone there, and end up raising a child who does not know their father, without any support. And then finally, leaving their children with their mothers, they trek the Sahara to reach the safety of Europe, becoming on their way victims of traffickers in the Sahara. The four war cycles with and within Ethiopia have taken the lives of hundreds and thousands of these young conscripts. The last one, which was actually during COVID times, 2020-2021, took the lives of almost a million young people, and a million others have been displaced. Rape and sexual abuse have been used as weapons of war in this war.

The Eritrean regime instigates war and conflict with neighbouring countries and then claims an ever-present state of emergency just to stay in power and not allow the implementation of the constitution or the rule of law. Peace and stability are actually the two things that the regime dreads. Although women and children are the main victims of these repeated wars waged by irresponsible government leaders – women are not invited to peace negotiations. They are not invited to have a say. And in any kind of deal or development deal they are left to pick up the pieces of whatever is left of their lives. But the international community, especially those engaged in protecting human rights, should prioritise pushing the participation of women in peace negotiations and implementation and also in development deals and agreements. Only then can we see a lasting peace, and only then can we see development, social, economic and political development, realised. Unfortunately, as Marie-Claire stated, the wars are encouraged by the weapons being sold by Western Countries. In Eritrea, the drones and all the other weapons have been provided by Saudi Arabia, the Arab Emirates, Turkey, Russia and even the United States. It is very sad to see that a neighbouring country would sell weapons, would give drones, so that mothers and children can be chased out of their homes and die in a very, very horrific way where they have no shelter to hide. So finally, as a member of the *Network of Eritrean Women* I say we need to call on the international community to put pressure on the Eritrean regime to stop endless national military service, and to release all the political prisoners. We also call on all women in the Great Lakes, Sahel region and Horn of Africa to unite in pushing for peace and stability in that region. Thank you very much.

**Marie-Lyse Numuhoza (Rwanda):** Thank you, thank you so much Sarah for all the insight you have given us about the challenges women and girls in Eritrea. One thing I would like to pick up from your presentation is the issue of sales of weapons, because we hear many times of lots of countries being given sanctions for selling weapons. Why would these countries that sell weapons, maybe for their own prosperity, so they say, their own business, whatever they put forward as an excuse, why don’t they give sanctions to countries and say, we will sell you weapons as long as you can prove how you’ve improved the social, economic well-being of your citizens or things like that? Why that doesn’t exist? And the question I’ve got is, how do you sell weapons, and expect economic improvement around economic development? Weapons are not meant to build, they are meant to destroy! I don’t know why people don’t see that. So I think this is a homework or task for us women here today, and those who will be meeting, to stand up and challenge the whole notion of arms trading. Because you cannot use the double standard of saying ‘we will trade in arms, but we also expect to deliver economic prosperity’ Those two things do not go together, especially economic prosperity, because arms are meant to destroy, arms are not to build communities. I would like for us to move on to our next speaker, Mama Kongosi Mussanzi, Vice-President of Common Cause UK. She’s also originally from DRC. Mama Kongosi has spent over 30 years campaigning and advocating for peace. She is also co-founder of the ***Centre Resolution Conflits* (CRC)** in the Democratic Republic of Congobut had to flee to the UK because of death threats. She is involved in conflict resolution, trauma counselling, and reconciliation with NGOs, churches, political leaders, students and women who are traumatized through rape. As a peacemaker she now works at a global level through talks. Danger lurked as these conditions worsened in DRC. She had to hide in the bushes with her children. Mama Knogosi was forced to relocate to Bunia but continued to travel to the communities to provide relief food. In 2002, the threats heightened, and she fled to England, where she now has refugee status. Clinging onto her dreams of peace, thousands of miles away from home, she gives talks in the UK, working with institutions like Action for Conflict Transformation. Kongosi Mussanzi completed an M.A. in Education Sciences and Psychology and worked as a teacher before working for the Internal Audit Section of the Centre Medical Evangelique in DRC. In 1993 Mama Kongosi co-founded with her husband the CRC which is involved in peace education, conflict resolution, reconciliation, and trauma counselling. Kongosi attended an intensive training session in 2000 provided by Working With Conflict. She later became the Director of CRC. She longs for the day she will return home to continue with the peace-building process. Welcome, Mama Kongosi, and I wanted to highlight that we call her Mama Kongosi because it’s a name of respect that we give our elders. We are so pleased to have you with us today, over to you Mama Kongosi, welcome.

**Mama Kongosi Mussanzi (DRC):** Thank you very much, and I’m so pleasedto be part of this team working hard regarding the suffering of women.And, as you said, I work mainly with grassroots women, So, as Marie-Claire stated, it has always been hard for us Congolese women to speak without emotion, following the suffering of our people back home. I’m from the democratic Republic of Congo, which is a huge country situated in Central Africa. A country too rich in resources, but so poor due to the humanitarian disaster starting from violent conflict which has killed approximately six to seven million people so far. And what is so sad is that this is happening in total silence. And people are killed every minute. As we are here, as women, tomorrow we’ll have the statistic of people who have been killed today. And this is in total silence, I will repeat that. In August around 400 people were killed and it was not even in the news. When young people were preparing for exams they did, like GCSE, young people not far from Goma city, bombs were thrown on them and mothers were just crying, all of them were dead. No news at all. The only news I heard on TV was mpox! Virus happening in the Congo is the news which will go viral. But no news about people who are killed every day.

I consider Congo like a honeypot which contains all kinds of minerals. So, people are ready to go from the West, from China, from all over the world just to taste this honeypot and not to care about the suffering of the population. What is in the honeypot? Gold, diamonds, uranium, cobalt. Now people are talking everywhere about electric cars, that is the blood of Congolese people ended again. Coltan, I remember with our banner we take every year to demonstrations ‘Blood in your mobile!’ Whenever you are using your mobile remember it’s coming from Coltan, which is the blood of people. The DRC is facing one of the world’s worst humanitarian disasters, with the largest internally displaced people. Marie-Claire said it clearly, around seven million people have been displaced from their villages, fleeing killings from different armed groups from within and from the neighbouring countries to the east of the Congo. I’m from eastern Congo, and those who are killing right now, taking different towns around Goma, and attacking the town of Goma, M23, supported by Rwanda. And recently Kagami was elected as President of Rwanda again, and again people from the West are just sending congratulations to him, without even sanctioning this M23 backed by Rwanda, killing Congolese people every single day. No sanctions, instead of sanctions, congratulations for his nomination. And that is very sad for us, coming from the area. That is our neighbour, and from the other side is Uganda, our neighbour. They are killing people every day in Kivu – you know their name, NALU, *National Army for the Liberation of Uganda*. Why are they killing people in Congo if they want to liberate Uganda? Why they don’t do it in Uganda? They are the ones killing people since three decades. And the majority of people in these places are women, children and old people, living in inhuman, unstable conditions with limited access to services, lack of water, food insecurity, lack of hope, lack of proper sanitation for women during their periods, no school for children, increasing number of street children, increasing number of orphans, widows.

Don’t even speak about sexual violence, and the increasing number of women and girls facing sexual violence and rape. Sexual violence is continuous in these displaced camps, when women and girls go out into the bush looking for wood for cooking, because the conditions are terrible. We came back in May and we visited the camp in Bunia, that’s where I’m coming from, and we visited the Goma camp, a few days after they threw bombs on people, my sisters I tell you, standing in the huge hall where people were killed, I felt my heart breaking, it was like someone was pounding on my heart. Instead of tears, it was like blood was coming from my heart, feeling the pain of people, meeting people whose family members were killed. Thinking of the condition of the people, Goma is near a volcano and all these people, thousands of people, are sleeping on lava, it is horrible, horrible conditions. And this is still going on. In the Congo we have women activists who are standing against this suffering, but what can they do? When we have a failed state, when the government is not caring about its own population, what can we do? And all of this is because of minerals. We are dying because of this honeypot. People are coming from all over the place, even our neighbours, that were never in the country, they are coming. The production of Coltan and so on, people are buying it, why can’t they not come? Just negotiate peacefully with Congolese people, instead of sending boys from Rwanda, and them killing us, let them die. What is good for us is to get this honey from there and not leave people in such conditions, such dehumanization, just because of these minerals. My sisters, what is sad is that all this is happening in the presence of the UN peacekeeping mission MONUSCO who have been in the Congo for two to three decades, thinking that they went to bring about peace. But they failed, there’s no peace since two decades. Yet - I found the number out today – they have 19,815 troops, doing their own business instead of protecting our population. I don’t know, it’s hard to endure this. As someone said, Congo is not a safe place for people to be, a woman to be, and it’s true. We even have this label calling the Congo the capital of rape. Women are raped because of minerals, and no-one can stop it, because of those who want these minerals outside, they just need it. You can be raped, sexually abused, that’s not their business. Their business is to get copper, to get cobalt, to get whatever they need. This has to stop. I’m saying it from my heart, and the pain I had working with raped women where you see even women of 75, 80 being raped by a young boy. It’s hard to endure. Enough is enough. This must stop. And honestly, the suffering of Congolese women has had a huge impact, even on women in Rwanda. You can say in Rwanda there is democracy. I’ve been in Rwanda, I’ve been in Goma, I went to the border and I saw the number of women crossing every morning, hundreds and hundreds of women with small things to sell on the other side. If they don’t cross, they cannot live. So where is the democracy in Rwanda? If at the grassroots level women are suffering. And let’s say this clearly, when they were saying ‘let’s send people to Rwanda’, my goodness, you are killing me, because you don’t know what they are doing to my people. And you say there is democracy in Rwanda – ordinary people are suffering. I’m Congolese, but I support these women from Rwanda who are enduring the pain and suffering. So we need to work to stop this, if we need peace. I do say every time, while we still have all these minerals, I don’t know if we can reach peace one day. I will finish this by saying young people who have been born during the war, their life is just fleeing every day, no way even to go to school. And these are the children that are easy to manipulate to become child soldiers. Let’s work together and support the kind of work that women are doing in the Congo, the resilience of women, what Marie-Claire is doing, what other women are doing, what we are doing in eastern Congo, let’s support this work so one day our sisters, mothers, bring about peace. That’s all they need, peace and going back to their villages. Thank you.

**Marie-Lyse Numuhoza (Rwanda):** Thank you so much, Mama Kongosi, for giving us the lived experience. Really, you have recently returned from those refugee camps, and you’ve had that first-hand experience of what those women are going through. It’s really painful, and I feel like now I’m obliged to say that I’m originally from Rwanda. Even though I haven’t seen that country for so many years, I do follow up with politics, and it’s sad and it’s painful. It’s not all Rwandans that support what the current leadership does. There are so many Rwandans who are against the dictatorship that have been imposed on my people. But I have hope, and I feel like as people continue to voice out about the wrongs done to Rwandan people, as people of the Great Lakes region, the Horn of Africa, as African mothers and European mothers and women coming together we feel that there is a need to amplify voices to just condemn the wrongdoings that are done in the name of arms trade as a source of economy, and many other things.

Mama Kongosi mentioned something that also captured me. We’ve had in the past campaigns against blood diamonds, what happened to the blood diamond campaign, why not blood electric cars campaign, because all these developments that the West is looking into for protection, avoiding climate change, are also having an impact on countries like DRC where the raw materials for electric cars are coming from. Where are the negotiations or discussions to make sure that even if we are moving towards electric cars, or everything that is environmentally friendly, the people in the areas where those resources are get protected and looked after rather than being enslaved and subjected to horrifying ways of life, and also the future generation growing up in suffering? So I just want to pass over again to Marie-Claire Faray to clarify, to just give us a summary, because we’ve heard from all three women speakers that there is challenges, there is suffering, but there is also hope. And the women at the grassroots have organized. Let us hear from Marie-Claire what they have been doing, then carry with us their hard work and see what else we can do to support these women who continue to strive to build resistance, and work with them on their journey to peace. So, over to you Marie-Claire.

**Marie-Claire Faray (DRC):** Thank you very much Marie-Lyse. You’ve heard all these challenges, and there is local resistance. Our resistance is about our survival. If we want to participate as women in peace building or reconstruction we have to resist, and we are resisting first of all against toxic and hostile environments, as you heard. Patriarchy, violent masculinity, sexism, colonialism, we are really resisting because we are still alive. We are there! And we would like to detoxify Africa from this violent patriarchy and the militarization and oppressive regimes that have been supported to enrich and for the prosperity of the West. And we have been doing a lot, as you know most of us have been members of WILPF and through the Voices of African Women we have been working as African women together since 2008, not only as diaspora African women but with our local sisters in Africa to raise our voices. This is a form of resistance for us. Also, it’s a way for us to push forward the Women, Peace and Security Agenda. We’ve brought in some of our sisters from the UK to Africa, and also we have been promoting the examples of other African women who are resisting in the diaspora and in Africa.

As you know, a lot of women, when we talk about feminism and we hear about first, second, third generation feminism, what we forget is that feminism is not a Western conception. It is also an African, and a women’s, conception. Indeed, feminists have always been part of African society. In much of ancient and pre-modern society there are many women who have been fighting against oppression, and we have been promoting the history of our pan-African women. Unfortunately some of our narratives have been diluted, and sometimes it is by Western women in the peace movement who don’t have the information, and think that feminism is a Western invention, because when they are writing about first, second wave feminism they don’t give examples of, for instance, the Bantu League of Women who were part of the ANC movement since 1918, or even earlier with Dr Maxeke. And they don’t know about the African Ubuntu principle of equality. We are faced sometimes with the issue of people thinking that equality and equity are Western principles, and people don’t know about the Manden Charter. So, this is something that we are doing, and bringing all these important instruments to decolonize, to remove racism, and to deconstruct. Because when you talk about racism in Africa, it’s actually a form of misogynoire, where Black women’s beauty has been stereotyped. I mean, we are not seen as human.

We are also trying to contextualise what peace means for us. What does that mean for us? What type of power do we want? We don’t want power that is hierarchical, we want a power that is transformational, a power of influence, or power that cares, that changes things. We don’t want military security, we want human security. We want the security that cares for our environment, that cares for our water. We want to participate, yes, but we want prevention of violence first, in order for us to participate. We don’t want just any participation. So that’s why we have. in the case of the Congo. created a *Women’s Peace and Security Centre* where we are resisting, because this Centre has a Crisis Unit where we provide some listening services to women, because if you come to Congo there are no Rape Crisis Centres, there are no refuges for women. There is no place where they can get support. Those who are leading in power at the moment have been co-opted into political parties where the political agenda comes before the agenda of women, healthcare and women’s well-being. So, in our Centre we have four different types of services that we are offering, but mostly first is information because the war has destroyed the social fabric, social structure, where women - even for survival skills – don’t have any. I think you heard when Zeinab was talking, because we were in the *Network of African Women*, was telling us about building centres, we need more centres where women can be protected, where they can get information, training, and we need translation because a lot of materials are in English or French, we need women to get the local translation because most of the time they force European languages on us, and we don’t get access, some of the women don’t even understand. So we need translation. We need women to go back and have activity generating revenue. But what we need, that is basically the most important thing for women, is for our menstruation. Right now, most of the pads that are sold in Africa have plastic, and those plastics are actually destroying not only the environment but destroying our health. And this is one thing that we are doing here in Congo is to start making washable and reusable pads made with cotton for women. This is a big problem here for women, the lack of sanitation that is causing women to not participate, not only professionally, academically, in school but also sending into prostitution. So we give training, and one thing that we try to make sure that they understand is human equality, they understand human rights, they understand all the legal framework on women’s rights and particularly their own reproductive organs. Because right now a lot of stereotyping comes from a misconception of women’s secretions, and the thinking that menstruation is a disease. We’re trying to explain all these to women, empowering them, and to understand that violence can lead to death, you know. And they need to understand all these hormonal changes, and violence, the consequences of violence, so that they can stand up for their own rights. We are also promoting and doing a lot of research, bringing in a lot of books to our library, where we have books written by African women with African philosophy and African thinking. And these are the things we do, and all the time take the opportunity to campaign and go to the media events where we can clearly resist together with women. Thank you so much for listening to us, Asante, gracias. Thank you.

**Marie-Lyse Numuhoza (Rwanda):** Thank you Marie-Claire for giving us a summary, leaving us with thoughts of positivity. I would really say, transformational power, a power that enables us to build our communities and our society. But most importantly, our resistance is our survival. Thank you for that. I would like to hand over to Rebecca for any questions.

**Rebecca Johnson (UK):** I would just like to say an enormous thanks to Marie-Claire and Marie-Lyse for facilitating, to Mama Kongosi , to Sarah Ogbay, and to Zeinab Burma for speaking of your experiences. For me, it has been the most extraordinary privilege in the last few years to work so closely with you on setting up some of the projects. It has been such a wonderful, informative, heartbreaking, but also incredibly powerful session, thank you to all the speakers and especially to Marie-Claire, for bringing this all together. Thank you. So, I can see that Marie Walsh is raising her hand – Marie?

**Marie Walsh (UK):** Thank you so much to everybody who spoke, not just for all the vast factual information you gave us, but for the inspirational examples of the way that you are fighting oppression in the face of so much trial, such a heavy trial. I can see that the work that you are doing is so much needed, and so urgent, but my question is very simple. I’m wondering how can we in the West, Women in Black who are not in Africa, how can we support you? How can we help and show solidarity and make a practical difference to what you are doing? What is it you would like us to do? Is there anything that we can do to support your interventions?

**Marie-Lyse Numuhoza (Rwanda)**: I think I’ll go first, quickly, I would say, this is the beginning. Offering us a platform like this one, to be able to bring you the experience of women from the grassroots, and then going out, everyone here going out and spreading the word of what’s been happening, whether it’s the challenges, but most importantly the solutions, and welcoming any resources that can help. I think that’s the first thing that I can throw on the table. But over to you sisters, anyone else who’s got something to say?

 **Marie-Claire Faray (DRC):** I think one thing I’ve raised already, mostly the challenge for us, as Black women from Africa, is the lack of consideration that we find sometimes, our White sisters not considering us as human or equal to them. That is the first thing that I will ask because mostly, when you look at African women, there’s a lot of stereotyping, because you have women coming from every part of life, but what you are seeing is mostly those who are part of the elite. And I can say, for instance, I am educated to a doctorate level, I am part of an elite, so it’s up to us now to look at those who are grassroots in Africa, don’t have a voice, those who are enslaved. And we need to understand that it is very important for us to contextualise the policies that are coming from the UK. It could be policies that you like, for example I can go to a platform when I’m talking about UN Security Council and saying we need to contextualise it, women are bringing in Eurocentric mentality to say no, it has to be done this way, it has to be done that way. It’s not the case, because in Africa there are other realities that we are facing and you need to trust us when we are prescribing things that are described for us, how we are doing it, and the way we are doing it for our own security. If you look at the *DRC Centre for Women, Peace and Security*, it is completely different, for instance, from the LSE (London School of Economics) *Centre for Women, Peace and Security*. I was here, responding to the needs of the women, and that is very important. If you don’t respond, to try to understand our struggle, our forms of resistance, it will be difficult for us to come together, and even to lobby together. And you have to understand that our suffering, the suffering of our children, is what is making prosperity for you in Europe or in America, and it is important to acknowledge that, and to try and see how you can limit even your own consumption of mobile phones, of technology, and try to lobby now to end the arms trade. And we know that some of the pensions from Europe, some of the money is being put into producing arms, it’s going in a circle. So, basically how can we look at each other as human beings? It’s very important for us.

And how we can stop the patriarchy that has brought this form of colonialism that European women, and I can say Western women, live on, and how can they accept that they need to reframe their mindsets even when we are talking about peace, and allow us to prescribe our own ancestral wisdom of peace, which might not be seen as the way you are looking at it, and that is very important for me, before even any funding can come, because sometimes people think the funding is more important, no, I feel it is our dignity, our respect, that is the most important thing, and sometimes aid is conditional. The amount of times, I think some of you might know about, because I stood up for sex-based rights , I was called, and threatened, and undermined by an organization that I trust, and organization such as WILPF, will give my contact to someone to undermine me, someone asking you know, because WILPF receives money from aid, so that I can be the platform. If someone like me, with the agency I have, is threatened, can you imagine? So if aid has conditions, you have UN women, you have all these organisations, you have all these organisations that support women in Africa, but the conditions for the aid is threatening women, silencing them, making them go into projects that are not needed, and sometimes you will see them bringing a project for three years and then that project doesn’t go far, because once the funding is finished everybody goes. So this has to stop. Thank you very much.

**Mama Kongosi Mussanzi (DRC):** Honestly, what we need at the moment is not even money, because I’m just coming from the Congo, I walked with these people, I saw their suffering, I lived their suffering, I put myself into their shoes. So what I said there, I have a small amount of money given by Common Cause, with thousands of people – who to support? We support just a few people, and it was not enough, and I said – do we need the money? We don’t need the money, we need peace. We need these people to go back to their villages, their towns, just to start their lives from zero. You can give money, it will not work. Give them peace. And that’s what we lack now. I would say, if we could work together just to bring about peace. We can do it with our voices. We can write to say, look at the suffering of people over there, what is happening with M23, they are killing freely. We can write and stop that, that’s the only thing we need. Secondly, because of these multinational people profiting from the conflict and getting to the honeypot, using children – that is painful, the use of children in the mining, we need to stop that.

 **Marie-Lyse Numuhoza (Rwanda)**: I just wanted to add to what Mama Kongosi said, linked to what I said earlier, we need more platforms for people to know how much suffering is out there, because we see all these international aid organisations saying, ‘we’ve done this’, ‘we’ve done that’ - but how many people actually benefit? Most important is human security. We need to create a platform to voice out more about human security. We don’t want more women in military uniform. We don’t want more women in air bases. We want people to be able to go to their own homes, be able to farm, get education, get health support and then raise the generation of people who are going to build and continue to raise the prosperity of their countries and their society. And I think that’s what all the sisters here today can take home and say ‘we create platforms, we mobilise to stand up for peace’. The Rwanda President being held to be a dictatorship, Putin being condemned as a dictator, what is that? What do we read between those two leaderships and the reaction of Western society? Thank you.

**Rebecca Johnson (UK):** I’d also like to say that we can look at, perhaps, any connections we have with a funder and help to uplift the voices of African women, of women who are more vulnerable because although it’s not about the money, of course there also needs to be some money. Marie-Claire is in Kinshasa with the project and needs to have enough money also to be able to ensure that the young women she is training, and that the centre has a location, and equipment and supplies and things like that, and these sorts of connections are also things that if you are in an organisation, or if you are privileged to be able to, or have access to, connections with funders in your own countries, think about how you can uplift the voices in different ways. I mean. I know Marie-Claire for a long time, but it was when I invited her to go on the Board of a small disarmament organisation, the Acronym Institute for Disarmament Diplomacy, then she started convincing us that it was possible to help set up, or help anchor, the project that Common Cause UK wanted to be doing with women in DRC, and very much did that from her position on the Board, and from that we brought Marie-Lyse onto the Board, and that allowed Marie-Claire to spend a lot more time working on the nitty gritty in Kinshasa and Eastern Congo. Now it wasn’t a huge amount of money from Acronym’s funder, which was the JRCT (the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust), but it enabled the project to get more resources. And in that context, also, a lot of you in your own countries can just think about what are the ways that you can add to that help, that uplifting, The project is run by Marie-Claire and Marie-Lyse, and that’s really important to understand this, as they’ve been saying, it’s got to be run autonomously by the African women running it. But we can help, as white women, or European women, or American women, just help to sow a certain funding seed that gives them the resources to be able to teach and train. It’s not one thing or the other, but it needs to be done.

**Marie-Claire Faray (DRC):** Is it possible for me to come in here? One thing that is important to stress with the *Women, Peace and Security Centre*, as I stated, the late Mama Khadija was very keen on starting centres. She had already planned for a centre in Sudan, and it was something she was telling us while she was alive, but we couldn’t find funding. The Centre here was started by funding for Congolese women from Common Cause. We started all the work ourselves, with some funding from my late sister, who died from ovarian cancer. This is something that is very important to understand, that once we ourselves put our own resources into a fund, into a project, and then our company, that means we are supported now with others who are coming, then we go forward. It’s not about us going into the funder and becoming conditioned by what that funder wants it to become or wanting to have some expected results. It’s about the results that we want, and we need. That might not be the result that the funder is looking at. So, this is the main problem that I was talking about, because most of the time funders want specific things, and it might not be to the context of what we are doing. That is very important for women or funders, or anyone who wants support, to understand that some of those funders are coming in to support our agenda, our road map. And it is very difficult sometimes to find organisations or funders who are willing to contextualise their funding, to enable us to progress. And that is the problem, if we didn’t get that funding, and that fund was very much welcome to enable us to progress our work, it was funded by the legacy of my late sister, who died of ovarian cancer. Otherwise, it would have been difficult. And it is sacrificial, because what happens is that not many women here are able to do that. When you go to women who are doing politics, it takes a lot of money going into politics, as you know, competing with males who have funding in politics. And I don’t know if you are aware of it, but some of the politicians like the Socialist movement, the International Socialists, they support Congolese politicians here, they support oppressive regimes, those big politicos who call themselves Socialist, International, they support politicians here who are oppressing women. So, we have to fight on all fronts.

**Rebecca Johnson (UK):** Marie-Lyse, we’re coming towards the end of our time, as Marie-Claire has got a difficulty with her Wi-fi connection from Kinshasa, perhaps you could invite all the speakers just to speak for a couple of minutes in their closing comments about what women here can do to uplift the campaigning on this?

**Marie-Lyse Numuhoza (Rwanda)**: Alright, thanks Rebecca. I think I’ll start with Zeinab, as she started earlier – over to you.

**Zeinab Fadlalla Burma (Sudan):** Thanks everybody, I’m really happy to be with you today, and to learn from your experience. I think for us in Sudan we need at the moment the support of the whole of the world to support us to stop the war in their campaigns and different organisations. And what Marie-Claire was saying about the funders, if they are not happy with what we are doing, perhaps you can help us to explain to them, because it’s true sometimes what they want is not what we need in Africa. If you can help us with that it would be really great, because at the end of the day, funding is really important for grassroots organisations, because without enough resources you cannot do anything. We have been trying to build our Centre in Sudan for more than 10 years but because of resources we were not able to get it. We have got the land, we have got a lot of things done, but it’s a matter of resources. So at the end of the day we need that, we cannot say that we don’t need it, but also we need our dignity, and we need people to respect this, and see exactly what the country needs – instead of from their side. Thank you so much.

**Dr Sarah Ogbay (Eritrea):** In the case of Eritrea, there is no freedom of speech and we’re not allowed into that country, because first of all, even if it is your country, you have to get a visa from the Embassy. If they want to detain you, they will give you a visa and the minute the plane lands you are taken from the plane into detention, and nobody would know where you are. So what we’re doing, is we’re trying to campaign against this transnational repression, where the government uses the embassy to hunt down people who oppose the government, people who are seeking justice, people who are asking for democracy in the country. We would like your support in convincing the NGOs, the international community, to protect those who are genuinely asylum seekers who are in the West seeking genuine protection. And probably some of you might have heard there is always a fight within Eritreans, because the government is using some people, some Eritreans who are refugees, to attack the ones who really are working for justice and democracy. Unfortunately, also, the Eritrean government that has been equated with, or damned, as the North Korea of Africa, is actually a member of the Human Rights Council at the UN. It was elected and selected there, and we have to present our case to the regime that we are opposing, and actually claiming should go. So, these are some of the things that the international community is doing against what the principles of an international community should be. Electing or selecting a country that has been damned as the North Korea of Africa into the UN Human Rights Council is actually gross. You can lose hope in the international community when you see this kind of thing, so we would like your support in putting pressure on the international community to really do justice by the Eritrean refugees as well. Thank you.

**Mama Kongosi Mussanzi (DRC):** I would just like to say thank you for this platform and creating this space where we can share our experience of what we do live whenever we go to work with women from grassroots back home, and we would like more spaces like this for their future. And what I would say that it can be good to support women back home, honestly mostly women but not only women, people are traumatized. If you speak to anyone, starting with doctors, my daughter is a pediatrician in a Hospital in Goma, she called me and they have lost so many doctors in a few months because of trauma. People are very traumatised. There is nowhere to go for counselling. If we could have this platform of counselling for people, that would be very good, because everyone is traumatized back home. That’s what I would say, and thank you.

**Marie-Claire Faray (DRC):** Thank you to all for registering and attending this session, and also thanks to you all for your messages.

**Marie-Lyse Numuhoza (Rwanda)**: I think everything has been said, but my last kind of tagline that I’ll go for, which applies to all of us present today, is that our resistance is our survival, and our unity will make us strive and hopefully reach for peace.

**Session 9: Role of NATO/OTAN 2.9.2024**

**Facilitators**: **Marie Walsh and Carol Stavris, Oxford WiB**

**Carol Stavris (UK)**: I’m not an expert on NATO, I haven’t done years of research into the organisation - I’ve just read its history and observed its actions. So why am I deeply worried about the aims of this military alliance of 32 countries in Europe (including our own) and North America, which has relationships with more than 40 non-member countries and international organisations, and which says on its website in a Factsheet dated 2015, that it is committed to individual liberty, democracy, human rights and the rule of law?

Following the Second World War, four European countries, Belgium, France, the Netherlands and Britain agreed on a mutual defence pact (the Treaty of Brussels signed in 1948), but it quickly became obvious that having the United States on board would give more protection. I was just over two years old when the North Atlantic Treaty was signed in Washington DC on 4 April 1949, Canada, Portugal, Italy, Norway, Denmark and Iceland were added at the same time. While the signing of this agreement was popular with the public of many of those countries, riots broke out outside the Icelandic parliament because the people wanted to remain neutral.  It was the first military treaty that bound together European countries with the United States. It followed Churchill’s speech in Missouri in 1946 for an “overall strategic concept” designed to ensure the continuation of the capitalist system following the Second World War, when many people, desperate for a better world after the destruction and suffering of the war, were looking for Peace and fundamental system change. In the words of Lord Ismay, its first Secretary General, NATO’s aims were to ‘Keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down’ in line with the propaganda of that time which was whipping up a frenzy of Cold War rhetoric against the Soviet Union - allied against Nazi Germany in the war, but soon to be turned into an enemy of the West by the propaganda of this military alliance and the governments of its member states.

Britain, although trying to recover from the devastation of the Second World War, began spending vast sums of money on warfare-related scientific development. In 1953, Britain was spending £187 million (£6.5bn in today’s money) on warfare. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union asked to join NATO in 1954 only to be rejected by the organisation’s signatories. West Germany joined the alliance in the summer of 1955 allowing NATO to push the organisation’s border right up against the East. The Soviet Union and its allies in Eastern Europe entered into the Warsaw Pact alliance which formed in 1955 and was immediately forced into an economically devastating arms race with the West. A supreme irony since the 2015 Factsheet states NATO is committed to arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation.

The United States began to consolidate its use of military airfields and residency of its personnel which had been based in Britain since 1942. The activities of the US Forces which frequently conduct training exercises outside these installations are governed by the NATO Status of Forces Agreement (that’s the treaty that sets out the terms under which the armed forces of a NATO Member State are allowed to operate and live within another NATO Member State). In 1991, the Soviet Union was destroyed along with the socialist countries of eastern and central Europe and after the break-up of the Warsaw Pact, there was no reason for NATO to continue in existence. However, the organisation continued to grow and many of the former Warsaw Pact countries were offered full membership.

Today, member countries must make direct contributions to NATO’s ‘common budget’ as a percentage of their Gross National Income to help with NATO’s running costs. The three biggest contributors are the US and Germany at 16% and Britain at 11%. NATOs annual budget and programmes come to about £3.2bn overall and at least 20% of defence expenditure goes on acquiring and developing military equipment. NATO also dictates how much each member country should spend on their own defence - Britain comes ninth on the list with 2.3%. The government has committed to increasing that to 2.5% but has not said when this will happen. NATO is meant to operate within the UN Charter. NATO and the United Nations have expanded their cooperation over the past decade, claiming to share a commitment to maintaining international peace and security. 2015 Factsheet states that NATO’s greatest responsibility is collective defence - to protect and defend NATO’s territory and populations. Yet on the 24 March 1999 the world changed forever. Lines were crossed that showed the true nature of the alliance. For the first time NATO conducted a military operation beyond its boundaries. For the first time force was used against a sovereign state without UN approval. There were “no boots on the ground” - sole reliance was on air power, the most advanced technology and deadly weaponry. Large-scale use of satellite missile-guiding technology made its debut. B2 stealth bombers were first used in live combat. There was no plausible reason to attack. Yugoslavia had never been a member of the Warsaw Pact. Events in Kosovo posed no discernible threat to the national security of any NATO country, yet public opinion was won over on the basis of a sophisticated and highly effective web of lies and propaganda.

The day before the first bomb fell, prime minister Tony Blair told parliament that Britain would do what it was about to do “to avert what would otherwise be a humanitarian disaster in Kosovo.”   But the aggression was long-planned and nothing Belgrade did or didn’t do could have changed the mind of NATO’s generals. In Yugoslavia, NATO saw not only the opportunity of ridding Europe of any last vestiges of socialism, splitting the country into controllable and exploitable statelets and securing access to high quantities of mineral resources, including the valuable lignite deposits of Kosovo, but also of testing the potential strength of the NATO alliance, its strategies, its new potential for “interoperability” made possible by huge investments in the advanced technologies of conflict, its military hard and software, and its potential to win the support of the majority of the population of member countries. Operation Allied Force was a deadly experiment, the harbinger of what was soon to come – a blueprint for future devastating interventions around the world.

In Britain, few people were aware, or have since become aware, of what truly took place. They have little idea of the sheer scale of death and injury, of the numbers of refugees and displaced people, of the destruction of thousands of homes, schools, hospitals, roads, bridges, airfields, oil refineries, factories, power and water plants, public buildings, the state broadcasting facility, and national telecommunications networks. They are largely unaware of the poisoning of the environment by toxic emissions from bombed industrial sites and the widespread and long-lasting effects of depleted uranium. To this day they have been kept ignorant of the fact that all strategic military targets were destroyed within three days, yet bombing continued for a further seventy-five, with lethal cluster bombs rained down on civilians. Neither do they know that civilian targets were deliberately attacked or that subsequent rescue attempts and medical teams attending the injured were subjected to secondary ‘terror’ bombing. There was no exposure of war crimes nor were there calls for justice and reparation. It was the first example of Nato’s normalisation of civilian casualties, the idea that high civilian casualties could be a necessary evil to promote peace.

For NATO, the aggression against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was a success by any measure. For the military-industrial complexes of the West, it was a vindication of investment, with the promise of trillions of dollars profit to be had from coming wars and threats of war. But for the people of the world, it was a tragic precursor of a whole new order of aggression – in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, Ukraine, Sudan, Gaza – a chilling warning to all peace-loving people. For me, this organisation NATO, represents unfettered power and permanent conflict. A NATO world is a world of aggression where all of us will suffer.

**Marie Walsh (UK)**: My wake-up call about the true role of NATO was at a workshop organised by some of the WILPF (Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (<https://www.wilpf.org> ) women at a peace movement conference I was attending around 2010. In the UK they don’t teach us about NATO in school.. through my adulthood I would have heard NATO mentioned – but for many years I never gave it much thought or questioned its role in the world. In those days, if you asked me what NATO was, I think I probably would have said it was the armed forces of the United Nations. In other words, my unthinking assumption was that it was a neutral peacekeeping force; not surprising really, since this is how NATO would like to be viewed. Not everyone is taken in by this idyllic image: these ‘postcards’ I have here were collected as part of a summer of resistance to NATO in Wales in 2014 when the NATO leaders were due to hold their 25th summit in Newport. What we found was that many people had never heard of NATO, or weren’t sure what it was… but at the same time there was a smaller core of people already on our wavelength and very willing to write a postcard with their own message to the NATO leaders. The messages show an understanding that our membership of NATO costs us far too much financially; money spent on preparing for war that could be spent on welfare. And that NATO does not make the world a safer place but actually stokes war and conflict. That was in Wales.. it’s a bit different in England.

I moved to Didcot, near Oxford, in 2018, and found that people here are a bit more accepting of the role of NATO than they are in Wales. But as well as that, I believe in the last few years we’ve seen an increase in public support for NATO in the UK and it seems to me that’s a direct result of Putin’s Russia invading Ukraine, together with how that’s been portrayed in our media. So what do people in the UK think about NATO at the moment? The sad truth is that there’s widespread support for NATO. And the latest survey results I found suggest that that support strengthened between 2021 and 2023. The British Foreign Policy Group (BFPG) 2023 survey said that 78% support the UK’s involvement in NATO, while only 9% believe we should leave. 75% said they thought NATO makes Britain safer, while only 6% believe it makes us less safe. And the support for NATO has grown by 11 percentage points since 2021. This is what the BFPG has to say about this… “This is largely driven by a fall in the proportion of Britons who are unsure of their view of NATO membership or who have never heard of the organisation, reflecting the growing prominence of NATO in the public consciousness since the invasion of Ukraine. It is striking though, that this increased awareness of NATO has been almost entirely funnelled into an uplift in support for NATO membership, highlighting how the prominent role NATO has played in Ukraine has made the strategic value of membership more evident.” I am asking myself how “the role NATO has played in Ukraine has made the strategic value of membership more evident”? Here is what NATO itself (on its website) says in the simplest terms about its role in Ukraine: “NATO condemns in the strongest possible terms Russia's brutal and unprovoked war of aggression against Ukraine - which is an independent, peaceful and democratic country, and a close NATO partner. NATO and Allies continue to provide Ukraine with unprecedented levels of support, helping to uphold its fundamental right to self-defence.” What is clear is that when NATO leaders can point to a threat (in this case Russia) and their framing of the situation is taken up and amplified by the media, NATO’s hand is strengthened, their public support goes up and they can demand more resources, further reinforcing their control on the narrative. And exactly the same is true of Putin and those who benefit from war-mongering in Russia.. NATO’s expansionism so close to Russian borders was undoubtedly used to whip up fear in Russia and to strengthen the hand of those pushing for military solutions. NATO can say it “condemns Russia’s aggression in the strongest possible terms” but it benefits from Russia’s aggression. Their framing of the situation, of course, is that Russia is and has always been an expansionist state, and its current president, Vladimir Putin, is the embodiment of that essential Russian ambition: to build a new Russian empire. But the NATO leaders have been warned for years, by their own analysts, of the destabilising effect of continued NATO expansion into the borders of the former Soviet Union. Among others, Biden’s CIA director, William J. Burns, has been warning about this since 1995. At that time he was a political officer in the U.S. Embassy in Moscow and he reported to Washington that “hostility to early NATO expansion is almost universally felt across the domestic political spectrum here.” In June 1997, 50 prominent foreign policy experts signed an open letter to Clinton, making the same point in even stronger terms. This is how the letter started “We, the undersigned, believe that the current U.S. led effort to expand NATO … is a policy error of historic proportions. We believe that NATO expansion will decrease allied security and unsettle European stability for the following reasons:” Why would the NATO leaders go ahead and take actions that would “decrease allied security”? It’s because they know that insecurity and instability are precisely the conditions that strengthen their hand. Only when the external threat is high can they justify continual increases in our spending on weapons, insist that we increase our state of ‘readiness’, and claim to be protecting their people – if this was on a smaller scale we would call it a protection racket. But isn’t that effectively exactly what it is? It seems to me that, in this dynamic, these enemies need each other. There is a symmetry and an interdependence about it. How do we counter this never-ending cycle of aggression? What framing of the situation best helps us expose the fallacies that NATO is based on? If their aim is a peaceful world – and that’s what they claim – then they are failing spectacularly.. yet they never question their methods or rethink their approach. I have to conclude that’s because they are not the least bit interested in peace but only in dominance. But how do we expose the true role of NATO to our people; the ones who only see NATO through the frame of its own propaganda? Maybe our first step needs to be getting really clear about the true role of NATO; find the evidence that backs up our view and find the way to put it over in simple, crystal-clear terms. Then maybe we need to find others who share our perspective and together look for ways to get the profile and platform we really need to get heard.

**Marie Walsh**: **Questions for discussion**

1. Do the NATO leaders believe their own rhetoric, i.e.‘NATO exists for peace and security’? Or is it just for propaganda value? And does this matter, for practical purposes?

2. Given that each side in the current European conflict (NATO and Putin-led Russian Federation) reinforces the other; can their strategy ever bring peace?

3. Does/should WiB oppose the existence of NATO? If so, how? What are some practical next steps .. (towards being part of a mass peace movement?)

**Marie** **Walsh** asked us to think about these questions and then drew the pillars holding NATO up. Answers from participants included: Arms Industry profits/££/Fear of Russia/Media/Militarism/lack of or weakness of international peace building mechanisms.

**Ulla** **Kotzer (Finland)** talked about Global Women for Peace – United Against NATO (<https://womenagainstnato.org>) and commented that 70% of people in Finland were against NATO before the war on Ukraine – but now only 30%.

**Sian Jones (Spain, ex UK)**: Countries that join NATO have to buy compatible weapons. Militarism is a key pillar holding up their support. The Serbian WiB slogan was ‘*Milosovic on the ground, NATO in the air*’. We have to chip away at the image NATO presents.

**Marie-Claire Faray (DR Congo)**: Stop funding for universities to research arms!

**Session 10: Open session**

**Facilitator: Lepa Mladjenovic**

**Mariella Genovese (Italy):** WiB Padova call for a ceasefire in Palestine through demonstrations and demonstrate against increasing military expenditure and risks to our planet from the wars in Ukraine, Palestine, Sudan, and Armenia. Inviting women from Ukraine and Russia to their weekly vigils.

**Vita Arrufat (Spain):** Every month in Valencia MdN are out to say ‘stop the genocide in Palestine’ in the main Square. We agree to a special day to Celebrate Life.

**Irmgaard Busemann and Annette (Germany)**: In Germany WiB grieve with both sides and believe in peace. We want no weapons and we mourn for every life. Many ships leave from Hamburg with armaments. We try to stop them leaving.

**Amudena Izquierda (Spain):** In Madrid MdN also demonstrate monthly in the main square. We write a lot of articles. We have good relations with Russian women via Telegram, so we demonstrate outside the Ukrainian embassy as well.

**Concha Martin (Spain):** We are also in contact with Russian women in MdN Valencia, some of whom have been in prison since the beginning of the war against Ukraine for putting anti-war stickers on goods in shops (<https://x.com/femagainstwar> ).

**Lieve Snellings (Belgium):** In Leuven we hold a WiB vigil every Wednesday for half an hour with placards that say Stop the war! Stop bombing Gaza!

**Celine Jaya (India):** We have held WiB vigils since 1993 in India.

**Marina Gallego Zapata (Colombia):** We have been activesince 1996 in Ruta Pacifica in Colombia, and in WiB since 2000. We carry out sit-ins, protest against war and call for negotiations and to put an end to armed conflict. This is the process that we are in. We meet on Sundays. In 2011 we hosted the international WiB meeting face-to-face in Bogota.

**Sherry Gorelick (US)**: In New York we have focussed on the genocide in Palestine since 2001. We say NO MORE ARMS!

**Betsy Cunningham (US)**: We started four WiB vigils in Baltimore after 9.11, now there is one every Friday. We create WiB stickers, peace cards in different languages, fliers, T-shirts, and ponchos, and buy Palestinian olive oil for gifts. Baltimore has a conservative Jewish population – including the Head of the Foreign Relations Committee. Fortunately there is a new one who speaks up for Palestinians.

**Lepa** **Mladjenovic** **(Serbia)** read a contribution from Parma Donna in Negro: ‘*Every Saturday morning - from 10h30 to 11h30 – we meet for a vigil under the Portici del Grano located in piazza Garibaldi, the main square in Parma, dressed in black, holding signs and pictures with banners laid on the ground. Weather allowing, we set a small table and unfold a long strip of cloth where people -more sensitive to Peace and War issues- may write a thought or a comment, and/or a drawing (this attracts especially kids). One of us distributes flyers which tell our story, or deal with a specific issue. Our group is made up of almost 35 women, usually just 10-15 are present (most of us are old and suffering from aches and pains). We count on new young women joining us. This is what we’re up against: war, militarism, violence, injustice, and the unwelcoming of immigrants. In Parma, we are involved in the initiatives of: Casa della Pace, Casa delle Donne, Via Maestra (to defend Italian Constitution, against far right government’s decisions). We participate in events with the following associations: CIAC (Centre for Immigration, Asylum, & International Cooperation in Parma and its province) such as Festival of Peace and protests against CPR (Permanence Centers for Repatriation), Palestinian Community, Kurdistan Community, Schools for Peace Net, Right to a House Net, ANPI (Italian National Partisan Association), and Parma Pride Committee.* [https://facebook.com](https://facebook.com/)/donneinneroparma’

**Session 11 Militarism robs resources from social policy – case study Finland 6.9.2024**

**Speaker: Leena Eräsaari**

Finnish Women in Black is part of Peacegroup 2022 (rauhanryhmä 2022), a new women’s network in response to the increasing militarization of Finnish society. Militarization started before Finland joined NATO in 2023, characterized by hardening societal values, aggression towards Russia, and preparation for extensive arms sales with USA (F36 Fighter-jets Arms trading) from early 2020.

There were a lot of new topics like getting compulsory military service for women. Finnish men serve 6,9,12 months in the Finnish army. Personal stories clarified young girls’ decision to serve and moral arguments emphasized gender equality.

The media gave a lot of visibility to discussions where the history of the relationship between Finland and Russia was re-interpreted. In many western countries the term “finlandizierung” (suomettuminen) from the relationship between Finland and Soviet Union was commonly used. It suggested that the Soviet Union did not allow Finland to practice independent foreign policy and was under “soviet pressure”. Officially Finland was a neutral European country, similar to Sweden, Switzerland, and Austria. During the Soviet time, the economic and cultural exchanges between countries were intensive, based on an Agreement of Friendship and Mutual Aid. The bilateral trade comprised about 20% of Finnish export trade, which was very advantageous due to high-tech Finnish products and energy and other raw materials of the Soviets. Yet the questions about civil rights in Soviet Union were not actively taken up in official politics.

In Finnish media (State owned Yle, was crucial) there were multiple journal articles and programs about new interpretation of the “finlandizierung”. The tone was very aggressive towards Russians and especially the Finnish left was accused of having good relations with Soviet Union. Then in February 2022 the Russian attack on Ukraine started and the whole discourse turned to new spheres. Hostility to Russian language, culture and politics has ever since been the core message of Finnish politics and media information.

All the old unhealed traumas of the last war opened and a new wave of russo-phobia and aggression emerged. This meant hostility towards peace activists. Our Peacegroup had a demonstration on International Women’s Day 7.3.2022 and were several times called Putin’s brides when saying the word PEACE.

The first major step after the Russian attack on Ukraine was: the media and our political establishment started to **talk about joining NATO**. Before the war there was a political consensus that Finland, as a neutral country would not join NATO, and in case Finland planned to join, there would be a referendum. But in 2022-2023 even talking about a democratic referendum for such a decisive political step was not mentioned. Peace activists who were demanding a referendum were silenced. Yet politicians and the media declared that due to the Russian threat, unpredictability and war in Ukraine, Finnish people (the President declared 88-90%) want NATO. The percentages were based on 3-4 polls (n=2000 people) that showed support for NATO membership increased from 40 to 85%. Then the Finnish Parliament voted for joining, and only 8 members voted NO.

One example in the process of NATO accepting Finland and Sweden as new members describes our increased militarism. As all NATO countries must accept new member states, Turkey demanded that Sweden and Finland accept USA arms-deals, (bombing fighter jets that were delayed due to Turkish military operations in Kurdish regions in North-East Syria) and deliver Kurdish people in exile to be convicted in Turkey for terrorist accusations. The Finnish media did not say a word about these preconditions or demands but ridiculed the Turkish parliament and dictator. It was the first of a new militaristic discourse to make clear that the human rights of non-western, less important people are not our concern, and made clear that the way to NATO is paved with losses in human rights and human values.

Finland became a member of NATO in 2023 without a referendum. Similarly, we got also a **DCA agreement with USA in 2024.** and again, practically without any public discussion. The Finnish Parliament voted for 15 military districts for the use of the US military; only one member of the parliament voted NO.

The border between Finland and Russia (1300 km) has been closed since November 2023. This means that people who want to travel between Finland and Russia via ground have to travel to Estonia. The reason for closing the border is called “hybrid influence” of Russia. It’s said that there are hundreds of people waiting near the border, that Russia wants to push to the border to get our systems of immigration into chaos and especially get terrorists into Finland. And the last instance of militaristic ethos is this: **In June 2024 the Finnish Parliament accepted a new law, the so-called Push Back Law.** This means that asylum seekers crossing the border between Russia and Finland can be considered as illegal without investigation by the border guards. This law is actually against the international laws (concerning refugee seekers) that Finland has signed.

Finland is one of the few countries in Europe that has compulsory military service for males. Our expenditure on military purposes has for years exceeded 2% of GNP, which is the goal for NATO countries. Before the War between Russia and Ukraine Finland bought a large subscription of fighter planes from USA and this is going to raise the 2%. Now “the army gets all possible weapons even before it asks”, said one member of parliament. We get daily from our media a portion of “arms pornography” as Finnish critical researchers call the description and praise of different armaments. Interestingly, politicians and media conceptualize arms deals as security or defence, which is paradoxical, and simultaneously we read news of USA or Israeli arms systems that can reach hundreds of kilometres. The sense of security is fully based on arms deals, and reduced only by hate towards our eastern neighbour, Russia.

Before the current militaristic discourse we used a wider concept of security and protection. That included democratic rights for all, gender equality, small differences in standards of living, and a well-functioning welfare state, whether concerning healthcare services or schools and higher education. In one word this large idea of protection was written into official (governmental) documents. But since the Russian offence against Ukraine security has meant arms, soldiers and anticipation of war.

We get this kind of military propaganda daily, news that make us afraid. For instance, the discussion of bomb shelters includes the possibility of nuclear bombs. So, these kinds of military discussions and topics are filling our daily life. One peace activist did express the situation in Finland: **Finland is living in the state of war without the war.** This is one of the reasons for the need for our WiB group: we need to reflect on the hegemonic militaristic discourse.

The new militarism is invading all spheres of life, including science and research. Historians or politicians with an interest in history have rewritten the history of the wars between Finland and the Soviet Union. Just to remember that the Winter war 1939-1940 between Finland and Soviet Union, was a separate war of the 2nd World War. The Continuation war was 1940-1944, where Finland was fighting against the Soviet Union in cooperation with Nazi Germany. In 1944 Finland and the Soviets signed a separate agreement to end their bilateral war, in September 1944, with a condition that the German troops must leave Finland, which was followed by the Lapland war against the earlier allies, German troops (1944-45). The rewritten history emphasized the unfairness of the lost 2nd World War, as well as the Soviet Union forcing Finland into friendly neighborhood relationships. Instead of losing the war we now heard that we won it (false news). Never before had we thought that the war ended in our victory.

Finnish politicians compare Finland’s war to Ukraine and promise Ukraine that we will support them however long the war lasts, even if it takes fifteen years. Finland has given a lot of arms and has started active production of more. And almost every day we get news of new kinds of arms that are provided for Ukraine or the Finnish army or for both.

What I’m trying to say is this: The previous government that was both female-led and the most radical we can nowadays get was also financing the war, ordered expensive fighters, started application to NATO etc. And was ready to turn a new page in Finnish history; no more a special relationship with Russia, no economical or cultural exchange, no negotiations. And now even the border is closed (since November last year.) Closing the border was the doing of the new government.

**WiB in Finland (Rauhanryhmä2022 ja Naiset Mustissa/Kvinnor i Svart)**

Rauhanryhmä2022 (Peacegroup2002) started in the beginning of the year 2022 to discuss the militarism and though we didn’t name it as a female group, we are only women. The number of the Peacegroup is 90 and many of us have been active in several peace movements over the decades. We have two peace organisations for women, WILPF (Finland) and Naiset Rauhan Puolesta (Fvinnor för Fred). But our members have been members of many other Peace organisations (like Rauhanpuolustajat, Sadankomitea etc).

It took a year to run this Rauhanryhmä2022 group before someone suggested to us that we organise also a group of Women in Black (Naiset Mustissa) and our WiB has existed since 2023. Women in Black Finland is a group inside another group. Naiset Mustissa organizes silent vigils once a month (last Saturday of the month) in Helsinki, mostly in front of the new fancy library, Oodi, in Helsinki. For every vigil we also prepare a leaflet about questions concerning peace and war (e.g., arms industry, USA military bases in Finland, Finnish cooperation with Israel in arms trade and human rights issues, and war crimes against civilians in Palestine and Ukraine). We have organized public events on International Women’s Days, and have participated in several demonstrations against NATO, DCA agreement, Push-back law etc. Our members are active in writing columns and opinions about war and peace issues in Finnish media. The Peace group 2022 has 90 members and about 10-20 of them participate in the vigils.

**Welfare state turns into Warfare state**

In 2023 we got a new, right wing government with conservatives and a conservative nationalistic party, that calls itself True Finns. The program of the government means cuts for social security, public services, health care, education, culture etc. and restrictions to all kinds of immigration. True Finns hate refugees especially but they are also misogynist. (For example their ex-party leader wished some women with different opinions to be raped.)

(By the way: Finland is on the top of the lists in Europe concerning violence toward women at home as well as racism.)

Only a few of the cuts to social security have so far affected people’s lives, but they will. Really, we are not only facing cuts but rather a new page in the history of the welfare state. In social policy there is periodization:

First the welfare state, second workfare state and the third one warfare state. The present right-wing government has made a program stressing employment, it sort of disguises as representing workfare state but actually it is not. It’s rather advancing warfare state.

The welfare state has two lines: social security and public services. The latter is more important for women than for men. Women are recipients as well as providers of public services. For example, childcare and care of the elderly is mainly organized by the public sector, not by the state but municipalities. The reason for daily childcare in Nordic countries is the fact that mothers work outside the home. And the same reason explains the public care of the elderly, plus that a lot of the old people live in the countryside whereas their daughters and sons live in the cities and towns. Adult children are not capable of caring for their parents. (Of course, men have also parents and children, but if they don’t get public care, it’s women who stay home caring for them.)

Social security in the Finnish context means pensions, allowances for unemployment, sickness and special needs, and allowances for housing. All these different kinds of allowances are now to be cut. The most intense hits are targeted at single parent families – mostly mothers and children. These families may get many kinds of allowances: a mother may be a precarious worker or unemployed, gets compensation for her small income and allowance for rent. Together these cuts worsen the situation of poor single parent families but also other poor people. The cuts hit poor and vulnerable people from many sides. There is a saying that the poor have to choose between medicine or bread. In the future poor people have to choose between bread, medicine and a roof. (Homes are really expensive in Finland, and the government tries to get rents lower by cutting the allowances.)

Women earn less than men by working in three low-paid c-areas: Cleaning, caring, and catering. (Feminist care-researchers have translated this in Finnish in three k’s: Kuuraus, kaitseminen ja köksäys.) Nowadays these area are also provided by immigrants, males too, but mainly women. As social security is bound to income women get less social security and thus live an unsafe life.

The welfare state means many kinds of services, not only health and social services (care work) but also education, schools and culture, civil society associations (NGOs). Opera, books and home help for the elderly need support/money from the state. I don’t have time to go into the structure of the Finnish welfare state but I just say:

Services (health, social, schools) are provided by the municipalities (local authorities) whereas social security is provided by the state. Universities and the specialized hospitals (University hospitals) are an exception, the state pays for them. And all that the state is providing at the moment are subjects for cuts.

For example, civil society organizations, like the peace organizations, had got some money from the state, this is over. NGOs working in health and social sector got money from the state; their subventions have been cut. Many of these associations are also vital for the wellbeing of poor people. The cuts to literature, museums, institutions that provide free learning etc. are a very bad hit to civil society. Literature, learning, music etc. are things that give meaning to everyday life and people. Help us to trust in life. They also employ people, so these cuts mean more unemployed people and thus are against the expressed aim of the government, to get more people to work.

Austerity hits all official Finnish bodies, our common media (Yle, like BBC in Britain), taxation, all ministries etc. Actually, all these officials work with modest budgets (compared to other EU members). The public sector is more vital for women than men in terms of employment. Turning from welfare state to warfare state is against the needs of women and children**.**

All these cuts to civil society at the same time as we put more money to assist the war in Ukraine, buy more arms for our protection, we hear every single day some news about war and get more and more restrictions towards Russia or Russian citizens etc. etc. We kind of breathe war. And this is why our WiB group (Naiset Mustissa) is so important for us.

**Session 12: International Lesbian Solidarity in Action 6.9.24**

**Facilitator: Heena Thompson (WiB Brighton, UK) with refugees in Kakuma camp (Kenya), Mary-Audry Chard, Shamsa and WiB from different countries**

**Heena (Helen) Thompson (UK):** Normally I wouldn’t do much speaking, but I will today as I’m delighted that we have lesbian sisters from different parts of the world who are joining us. I’m aware that there may be difficulties with data, and if you want to jump on and jump off, that’s fine. If you want to switch your cameras off that’s also fine. And I will definitely be calling on you very soon, but if you’ll forgive me and bear with me, I have been asked to speak, so I’m going to say a few words and then I will pass over to others to talk, there’s quite a few of us who are going to talk in this session, which I hope will be very inspiring, and obviously it will be recorded.

So just to let you know I’ve been in contact with lesbians who at the time in June 2020 were based in the Kakuma refugee camp in Northern Kenya, and I made contact through Facebook. There had been a call out for first responders, LGB and T plus refugees in the refugee camp, and I connected with them with video calls. I became aware of international individuals who are supporting LGB and T refugees, and the international supporters were in the US, Canada, Spain and other countries at the time, and have been in many more countries, since there were requests by the people on the ground in the refugee camp, the LGB and T plus people for advocacy, which included emails, calls to UNHCR, the media, press, and to reach out to other individuals and organisations. There were also requests for funds, for money, for food, for basic provisions and for medicine. It was quite clear from the outset that the people were in the refugee camp because of the political situation. It was, and still is, illegal to be gay in Uganda, the neighbouring country where many of the refugees had fled to Kenya from, Kenya being a little bit more relaxed, but it’s also illegal in Kenya and this has a massive impact on the society. It means that the police can be very hostile to anybody who is reporting a crime, they may well get arrested themselves for being gay and may get a very difficult reaction from the police. The hospitals, schools were all very hostile, and it was a very, very difficult situation in the camp, not just it being a refugee camp but in terms of the homophobia that existed in the camp. UNHCR seemed to be doing very little. We held an amazing protest outside UNHCR offices in London, which coordinated with protests in Canada and the USA, because of UNHCR’s inaction to move the people from the camp to safe third countries.

During the course of the time, I can’t begin to say how many things we have been involved with, but there’s lots of things which have included lots of people, not me, but lots of people writing newspaper articles. There was somebody who joined for a while from Israel, there was our Ana in Uruguay who wrote articles in Swedish newspapers, there was a counselling group that was set up on the ground for refugees, and there was a school for the children that was set up in Block 13 in the Kakuma refugee camp, because of the hostility towards the children who were being called all sorts of homophobic names when they were going to the regular school in the refugee camp. There have been a number of conferences, which have included Million Women Rise, the lesbians who are joining us today have joined FiLiA, and I’m glad to see two very strong amazing women here from FiLiA today. There was the Bremen lesbian Spring Festival, and there’s been more recently a lesbian conference here in Brighton which people have joined from the camp. So now I’m wanting to call on a couple of others to speak who, again, are normally in the background and not speaking, so I’m going to allow them the space to speak in terms of our solidarity and sisterhood before we move over to our sisters who are on their refugee journeys. I’m going to call on Tina first. We may need to interrupt because our sisters who are in a refugee camp near the Kakuma refugee camp, a different camp, may join us – the internet is very unstable so we will interrupt and allow them to join whenever they are able to. Thank you, Tina:

**Tina Gianoulis (USA):** Thanks, Heena.I’m speaking for a little group of lesbians in Seattle, Washington, and we’ve been involved for about three years in fund-raising for the lesbians of Kakuma camp. Kakuma was the first refugee camp we knew of to set aside an area for LGBTQI asylum seekers – Block 13. And we first heard about Block 13 from Heena during one of the Women in Black lesbian zooms that we started having in 2020, when Covid caused the conference that had been planned in Armenia to be cancelled in person. So even though we were really sad not to get to see each other in Armenia, meeting on zoom we discovered an amazing lesbian activist community that had more continuity than just connecting at a workshop and a few dinners every other year. And we have learned so much from each other over these years. When Heena told us about her work supporting refugee lesbians, we wanted to get involved, and our first chance to do that came when a number of their shelters were destroyed in 2021. The shelters were destroyed by other residents in the camp, and we were horrified, so in Seattle we gathered donations just among ourselves and sent money for replacement shelters. And then we wrote a fundraising letter and sent it out to everybody we knew, political, social connections, everybody – mostly lesbians, but some others too. People responded really generously, and we’ve been able to help with a lot of day-to-day necessities of camp life, like food, medication, mosquito nets, period supplies, school supplies for children, even a new toilet. From time to time, we have been able to send funds in a crisis, when all of the women’s food was stolen, for example. Between now and then we have managed to raise over $30,000 through grassroots person-to-person fundraising. No organisation, officially, tax exempt or anything, just people wanting to give money, lesbians particularly wanting to give money to other lesbians. And we’ve been able to offer support to around 30 lesbians and their children and other family members.

Over time an international coalition has formed to expand and coordinate those fund-raising efforts, and this has included lesbians from Germany, the UK, Uruguay and Zimbabwe, as well as us from the US. And representatives from the fundraisers meet monthly with our sisters in the camp, on zoom of course, to talk about needs and make plans. Those meetings have been incredibly important, just seeing each other’s faces and hearing each other’s voices has really meant a lot to all of us and helped us build solidarity and keep affirming that we are still there for each other, and the whole process has resulted in us feeling somewhat like family and community, and that this connection has been so valuable to all of us. We’re hoping that some of you who have been hearing this will also be inspired to join us, and this important work of building community across borders. We’ve been so excited that two of the lesbians who started in Block 13 are now beginning new lives in Canada, and we have really high hopes that others will follow. But they still need support to stay alive and fight for their status so they can get out too. And right now, the women living in camp are asking for $1500 for food, menstrual supplies and medication for around 14 women and children for the next 2 months. Our funds are low, and at this moment we only have about $250 among us to send, so we really need help, and we really want to encourage all of you to do just what we did, contact women in your social circle, your community, your political allies, and ask them to contribute whatever they can to these women’s survival. And we know there are a lot of worthy places to send your money these days, but just a small donation can make a big difference in the lives of these really vulnerable women. Thank you for listening.

**You can donate at: https:gofundme.com/f/Kakuma-sisters-support-lesbian-refugees**

**Heena Thompson (UK**): Thank you so much Tina, I’m going to call on Shamim, who has just joined us from the camp but is not well, if you can say a little about what lesbian solidarity means for you, and how you are?

**Shamim Naiga (refugee camp near Kenya):** Hi everyone, I salute you all. I have been an asylum seeker for all the years since 2019 from Kakuma refugee camp, I’ve gone through a lot. I salute our sisters who have been there for us all along. Thank you for your assistance, but I’m not well.

**Heena Thompson (UK**): Shamim, it’s really good that you were able to join us. I realise that you are not well, and have been receiving treatment, and hope that you can continue to receive treatment and that you feel very much better soon. We will let you go and rest. Hadija, would you like to say a few words? Would you like to say how you are, you don’t need to say where you are, you can just say a tiny bit, maybe about Kakuma, about lesbian solidarity in action?

**Hadija Nakawooya (refugee camp near Kenya)**: Thank you so much for this opportunity, and I am happy to see a lot of people have come out in this session. My name is Hadija, but you may prefer to call me Hadi Adams. I’m a Ugandan, and I grew up in Uganda. I’m a lesbian. I left from my home country and I went to Kenya in 2019, so solidarity means a lot to me because if it was not for solidarity I would not be alive at this moment. Because it has been so, so long and it has not been easy for us until our international sisters came in and started helping us in each and every thing. I’m so happy for that, and I appreciate a lot because you have been there for us for so long and you are still fighting for us. Life is not so easy for us here, but in all ways you have been there for us. I’m so happy, you don’t know how happy I am, you don’t know how I appreciate it. Thank you so much, thank you for all, thank you.

**Heena Thompson (UK**): Thank you Hadi, thank you for joining us, and it’s good to see your face. Latifah, would you like to join us and say a few words?

**Latifah Namwamje (refugee camp near Kenya)**: Hello everyone! Thanks a lot for these opportunities, we like to see all our lovely sisters out there, and we really, really love you so much. Solidarity, we are really appreciating you for that great work you have been giving from the start of the journey. We range from our home countries, but you people, you’re very good, you’ve been there for us from the start. Some of our sisters have succeeded and left us here in the camp, and that is great, but at least you can see something that you have been fighting for, something going on, and I’m assuring you, we are also going to succeed from this suffering. We are going to make you proud. We will be so happy to join you there, where you are, and be calling you people, you come and we enjoy together, because you have been so good to us right from the start. We really appreciate you lovely sisters and thank you so much. We love you all.

**Heena Thompson (UK**): Thank you Latifah, I realise that the network is really very poor where you are and it’s great that you are able to join us, and great that you can say a few words, so fantastic to see your face. It’s not a very good signal where you all are at the moment, so perhaps I can call on Dagmar to say a few words.

**Dagmar Schultz (Germany):** Hi everyone, I’m very glad to be here, and to have been part of this long-term effort, and I think what Tina said was very moving, and I can only support that. In Germany we were a group of about 7-8 persons, now just 2 left but we started out in 2021 after Helen and Lepa first announced that information on the group in Kakuma. It was very important to have the possibility of zooms and having that kind of personal contact was important for WiB lesbians in general, and especially now to be in contact with the women in the camp. It was very upsetting to hear about the extreme violence and the fears the women were exposed to and know the impossible situation for children. So what we were doing in the beginning was just writing letters to Deputies and government people, and UNHCR and embassies, which was not very successful. And then we started publishing articles, and that’s especially one woman, Ulrike, who was very active in writing, but also some of the others. And then we had a zoom with the Women’s Centre where there was an exchange between women from Kakuma and women – it was publicly announced – who came in on the zoom, and that then also started with trying to generate funds to support the needs of women in the camp.

We were asking ourselves some questions, because we didn’t want to be like the privileged women sending money, and we were kind of at a loss, trying to figure out other ways we could be supportive. So that was then mainly publicising the situation at the camp and trying to put pressure on people who had some influence, but as I said, that was not super successful. But we were also trying to find contacts to persons like lawyers who would possibly be of help to women who could not even get the interview to be established as refugees and were just so frustrated by sitting in this camp for years and not being able to get on with their own lives. The fundraising was the main activity, and there’s a big national conference each year of lesbian women and Ulrike did a programme there, and this year women from the camp participated in video presentation and that was quite successful in terms of fundraising. Right now, we are just really happy and relieved that some women, at least two already, have gone, and have a new life ahead of them, and there seems to be possibility for others. This has been possible through international contacts, like women from Canada who made it possible that two women could go to Canada. One is waiting to get the papers done. And there seems to be now an opening, at least. So, this is what I can report from Germany. Thank you for the endurance, and for being always in contact with us, and sharing your situation. As Tina said, it would be wonderful if there would be efforts now to continue support. That’s needed, because there are still quite a few women who are trying to get out, and who are in a situation where they need daily support in Sudan and Kenya. Thank you.

**Heena Thompson (UK):** Thank you Dagmar, and I’m wondering if we can hear from some of the others who are here, who are in hiding in different parts of Kenya? Anne-Marie, are you there?

**Anne-Marie Josephine Nalugwa (Kenya):** Thank you Heena, hello dear sisters, it’s really nice to meet you all. Of course I recognise some faces here, they’re the ones who have been supporting like for years, for years they have been standing with us, giving us love, the comfort, we are really thankful because if it wasn’t for you, I don’t know if we would have persisted, I don’t know if we would have kept going till today, but it is all your support, your love, we are really thankful. Our story, our journey, has been really, really hard. Till now, it is really hard to survive every single day, when you don’t even expect anything from those who promise to protect you.

I would like to give you a little update on what is going on here in Kenya, like the Commissioner who is responsible for refugees, he sent a statement saying that they are no longer registering LGBTQ people. So my question is, what is our status right now here in Kenya? It’s like we are criminals. Either we are criminals, or hostages, because they are saying they are no longer registering us, and we are still here, we are not accepted to go anywhere. So, what is our status right now? I really do ask myself that all the time. What is our way forward? What are we going to do next? If the person, like he is from the government, who is supposed to say, ‘yes you are an asylum seeker’, or ‘you are a refugee’ says we are no longer recognised. Then what is next with our lives? That really frustrates me, breaks my heart, what are we going to do next? Because fine, some LGBT organisations are coming together to go to the court, but in Africa we still have that problem – the court is the government, right. So you can say yes, we’ll go to the law, but will it really help you? Which I doubt. It’s like we are in a game, we are in a stuck hole, we don’t know how to come out of it. It is really frustrating. It is really heartbreaking. And all in all, yes you sisters you came out to help, but internationally some people, because we say these things, we do advocate, right, telling the truth because we know the truth, but those people out there they don’t listen to us because they are representatives in the UNHCR internationally, they need to call, to be part of this. They need to come down and know exactly what is going on. They need to get the stories and find out what is wrong, right? Because as sister Dagmar said, they tried to send letters. If you get these letters you need to come out and say, ‘but what is the problem?’ If they get these letters internationally, they need to come down and know really what the problem is. But they are not doing anything. We are registered under them. It is their responsibility to come out and work out, find, a durable solution. But it’s like they don’t even care whether we die, or we survive, it’s not their problem. They get money to take care of us. Then what is going on, the government is saying they are not accepting us here, then what is UNHCR saying back? What is their response? As we are under them, they need to give us an explanation. Who are we here? What is our status? It really frustrates me. So, this is the situation that we are in now. We don’t know, like, who are we here? Because in case the police now arrest someone, they can even tell you like ‘overstay in the country’ because we are here illegally. That is what it shows.

**Heena Thompson (UK**): It’s a shocking situation Anne-Marie, and my heart goes out to you, and the frustration and the amount of things you have to put up with, that keep changing, and the situation does not get better. But I am so glad that we have at least two sisters who are with us today who have managed to get out. And can I just say a massive thank you to you Anne-Marie and call on Shifra to speak next.

**Shifra Twesigye (Kenya):** Thank you sisters for supporting us. What my sister Anne-Marie just talked about right now is what I want to go to straight away, because we all have the same questions, who are we in Kenya. We fled from our home countries, we fled from persecution. I want to get straight to the point what Anne-Marie said, it pissed us off that we fled from our home country, due to persecutions, escaping death from our families, government and the community, and the Kenyan government, and UNHCR accepted us, accepted to register us. It could have said, no we refuse to register you, go back to where you came from, or just go anywhere else. But they accepted just because they get funds to protect us. But right now we are in Kenya, we are like hostages. They don’t want us anywhere, not in the camp, not in Nairobi, not anywhere, and they can’t let us go even if we get private sponsorship. The organisation is really hard to get out of Kenya. The Kenyan government has to grant us permission to move out of its country, but still it doesn’t want to give us permission to move out of its country. So we are really going through a situation. We have tried all the international communities, the officials, the representatives in the UNHCR to Geneva and everywhere but they are not listening to us.

In the camp where we have survived rapes, death, fire, threats and all the other sorts of torture. We have been struggling to get everything, like all the basic needs in the camp, we have to fight for everything. But the government and UNHCR have kept a deaf ear, they have closed their eyes on us, they should at least let us go. The other LGBTI have decided to go to a very dangerous country, just because they can’t be helped in Kenya. We have so much pain here sisters, and I thank the lesbian community that has supported us for a long time, you are the reason why we are still alive, you are the reason that Juliet is in safety, you are the reason why Reginah is in safety. We call upon all the sisters who are here today to join us and continue to fight for our freedom, to get to safety. To support the basic needs that we have because we cannot work in Kenya, we can’t go to school, we don’t have a right to move freely. We are just like prisoners. Thank you very much sisters.

**Heena Thompson (UK**): Thank you very much Shifra. I think it would be great if we could follow Shifra by hearing from Reginah. Reginah, can I call on you to speak, and just talk a little bit about lesbian international solidarity? And maybe you can start by telling us where in the world you are?

**Reginah Kyazike (Canada):** Thank you Heena. Hi everyone, this is Reginah, I’m so happy to be here. And I do appreciate all those sisters who have been there for us from day one, up to the day I left that homophobic country, Kenya. Some of the sisters are here, I’ll not mention all, but they know themselves, Dagmar, Tina, Janice, Heena and all. I do appreciate the work you’ve been doing for us. You’ve been there for us, and you’ve been supporting us for years, and I don’t regret to meet you all. Right now I’m in safety, I’m in Canada, in Ottowa and the province is Ontario. I’m excited that I’m now in safety with my children, and they are at school right now. I can now express myself, I can do whatever I want, and I’m having freedom. Actually, it’s a lot, and I’m so sorry that my sisters who are still in homophobic countries like Kenya and Sudan are still suffering. If they are strong enough, one time, one day they will leave those homophobic countries. Thank you!

**Heena Thompson (UK**): Thank you so much Reginah, it’s so good to see you and to see the photos of you and your children in a safe third country. You went through a lot, and it’s so good to see you in safety. Juliet, can I call on you to speak a little, and I wonder if there’s something you can say about where you are now, and where you’ve been.

**Juliet Wabule (Canada)**: Hi everyone, this is Juliet, I was so happy to see your faces, and so happy about Women in Black. This is, I think, my third time here. It has been amazing to have you in my life, in our lives as lesbians at Block 13. We appreciate that you have been so many things that I can’t even measure in fact, above all you are loving sisters, you are the family we never had back home. I want to add on to what Anne-Marie was saying, we’ve been here, I got to the camp in 2019, and it has been nothing but suffering all along. But our international sisters have given us everything our parents didn’t even give us. You’ve given us unconditional love, and you’ve been there. I can’t even thank you enough. What I want to tell my sisters back, who are still in the camp and in Nairobi, is just be strong, and be positive, right? You be strong, that’s what I can say, because nothing else I can say. I wish I could manage to give you all everything you need, but I’m not there, I’m not in a position to help, but I really feel for you, and I want to continue fighting and saying and doing whatever I can to raise the voices. I won’t stop until you are all out of that bad situation. Right now, I’m in Canada, I’m in Vancouver DC, and all thanks to Seattle sisters, Helen, Sally and my dear German sisters who have been there, who have made sure that we get everything that we need so that we can get here.

Like Anne-Marie said, Kenya doesn’t even want us to get out. They don’t help us to get out of Kenya. I don’t know what is going on with them in their minds. We had to stay for extra months to get passports to get out, they did not even grant us exit permits. Like Reginah has been three months to process her children’s passports so they could get out. We had to fight always. If any of you have been arrested you can understand this one, of being in a country where they don’t like you, and they have nothing to do with you, but they want you to be there, like you are in prison. Your hands are tied, you can’t talk, you can’t move, you can’t do anything, that’s what those countries are. But hopefully I believe our sisters in South Sudan will be helped, but until then they still need our support. They need day-to-day life to continue, they need food, they need things that sustain themselves, because South Sudan, they just register you and then you are there on your own. So we still call upon our other international sisters to continue helping our sisters in Africa to get saved. Otherwise, I just really appreciate everything. I don’t how to say that, but I know you know how appreciative I am for helping me, and for being there for me and my children up to today. Thank you so much.

**Heena Thompson (UK**): Thank you so much, you all give us so much as well. Thank you for coming to this meeting today, and for talking with us. Mary-Audry, I’m wondering if I might be able to ask you to speak next?

**Mary Audry Chard, Director of Rise Above Women’s Organisation (RAWO, Zimbabwe):** Yes, that’s fine.Hello everybody, it’s so lovelyto see everybody from the camp, and those that have left. Thank you also to everybody who made it logistically possible for me to join this meeting. Heena and Tina, you don’t say a lot, but it would be remiss of me not to mention how helpful you have been to me and the organisation that I lead here in Zimbabwe, so just also to say thank you very much for that. And the women here really appreciate it as well.

I’m just going to go off camera and give a brief rundown of the work I do [*shows aims of organisation onscreen*], and my part that we played with the women in the camp. As I said, my name is Mary Audry, I’m based in Harare, Zimbabwe, and am the Director of an organisation, RAWO, *Rise Above Women’s Organisation*. I have been very privileged to be part of WiB before and ever since the Conference that was held in Cape Town in 2018. Here in Zimbabwe the work that I do with RAWO is we reach out to lesbian, bisexual, trans and pre-identifying women to try and build a stronger community through our advocacy work and awareness of issues around stigma, discrimination, violence and other social and economic issues that have quite a negative impact on these women.

And we do all this work not only in the city of Harare, but we also do it right around country, we do it in Zimbabwe basically, but we also have projects running in three other cities, Bulawayo, Chinhoyi and Masvingo. So our efforts are also to get women to be at a point in their lives where they’re able to actually self-advocate. They live in different communities, they come from different backgrounds, of different ages, and the needs are all very different. Unfortunately, we also operate with little or no funding, and funding is also very specific. Right now, the funding that we are working with around these issues is for access to healthcare services, and that is a particular project. So outside of seeking healthcare, we are not able to assist the women who also suffer from all the ills of a country with an unemployment rate that has gone through the roof, an economy that has crashed many, many years ago, homophobic practices, cultural beliefs that are very, very harmful not just to lesbian women, but just women in general. We try and ensure issues of safety, issues of access, the vulnerabilities of these women are so varied and so different. And I must say, people like Heena, people like Tina, and the Seattle sisters have been very forthcoming in providing some kind of support. For example, just looking at the dignity of women having a period, and not having any kind of hygienic products, or even clothing to wear during that time, I think is one of the worst social ills there is. But it is something that happens. I say this not to try and emphasize how much these women are in vulnerable positions, because I know in different countries the degree of suffering can be very different. Issues around homelessness would be more negatively impactful in different countries than it would be here, but we do suffer all these kinds of negative issues.

So my involvement with the women in the Kakuma camp, I just thought that the skills that I had developed over the years, also with the work that I am doing here, gave me the opportunity to share my own understanding as an African lesbian as to how can I contribute to the work being done with the women of Kakuma – I don’t want to call them the women of Kakuma, because I don’t think that’s where they all are, but more the women that were in the camp. I think the community of LGBTI persons in the camp were actually living under the most horrific conditions, I can’t even put it into words. The negative, dangerous and horrible conditions that the women and the entire LGBTI community were living in. So, these were incredibly hard times. They were living under the stresses of poverty, daily threats of violence, oppression, and just listening to what Shifra and Juliet and Anne-Marie are saying, it’s actually getting worse. It’s getting worse because even the government that is supposed to protect you through their agencies is not even doing that. They are actually bringing the threat to you. And I think this threat is also being fuelled by the anti-gender, anti-rights movement which is coming in fast and hard from the West. Slowly but surely African governments are starting to make these laws that become just even more and more difficult for queer people to survive. When we try and run, the danger is increased, even countries where they are taking you in. So I think what I did try and contribute was just looking at issues of how the women could come together and organise amongst themselves. How to deal with issues around conflict, and how to continue to maintain their own kind of dignity no matter how bad they felt that they were in the situation that they were in. That they should continue to maintain dignity and pride. Because the fact that they had gone through everything that they had gone through and were still alive, and were still able to stand strong and advocate, I think that is more than anybody can ever ask of them. So I think that was a very small part that I played, and over the last few months I have not been able to join some of the meetings that I’m part of, like the Fundraising committee, as well as the broader Women in Black meetings. Issues around electricity, power, data, just so many things, and also my own personal struggles with the work that I’m doing, and my issues at home. But I think that’s all I can say, for now, and again thank you so, so much to Heena and Rebecca for putting this together, Seattle sisters, and each and everybody that’s on this call today, I really appreciate you. Thank you, thank you everybody.

RAWO – email rawoagenda@gmail.com Call/WhatsApp +263 777 781 573

**Heena Thompson (UK**): Thank you so much Mary Audry, and it’s always really interesting, and I’m just going to say what Shifra has said in the chat, you didn’t play a small part – you played a big part, and I agree with her. I think that you have been incredibly insightful, useful, interesting, and helpful when there have been all sorts of conflicts, as there would be, so it’s been really helpful having your knowledge, experience. And as for the work you do with the women in Zimbabwe, it is phenomenal, it’s incredible. I would like now to call on Shamsa, who has been waiting very patiently.

**Shamsa Ali Haji (South Africa):** Hi everyone,my name is Shamsa Ali Haji, I’m Somali Bantu from Somalia, a lesbian in South Africa. I left Somalia (in 2007), arriving in South Africa in 2012, then we came to Kenya to the Dadaab refugee centre, we stayed there for four years, then we came to South Africa but we came with a trafficker so we had to pass through so many countries to Botswana, then from Botswana we had to pass the zoo (Kruger) to South Africa. But because I’m a Muslim and a lesbian, and being Somali, the family that brought me they didn’t understand, so I had to run away from them. Then I came to Cape Town, to the refugee Pride shelter for LGBT where I stayed. So my solidarity for the Women in Black is: thank you so much for helping us – Heena, Rebecca, Janice, Tina. For us here in South Africa because, as Anne-Marie was saying, the government is refusing to give us papers in South Africa, the thing is LGBT is legalised but when you go to the Home Affairs and you are asking for the document that you are supposed to get for free, you have to pay money for you to get your document. So, for us too here in South Africa the lesbians are suffering too much, because of the documents. And life is not the way it seems because it’s xenophobic, when you are walking you have to look over your shoulders everywhere you go because you are running away from your community, and you’re running away from the citizens too. So life is hard too here. But thanks to the Women in Black for the help that you have given us, and the support, and we appreciate everything that you have done. Thank you so much.

**Heena Thompson (UK**): Thank you so much, I really appreciate it. I’d like to open things up a little bit for some questions, thoughts, ideas now. If anybody has any comments, I’m just going to be quiet for the moment and see if there’s anybody who would like to speak.

**Sally Jackson (UK):** Thanks, Heena, always a delight to spend some time with our friends from Kakuma and in various places now. I remember that weird summer of 2020 during lockdown, and we’d all managed to meet up on the beach in Brighton when we were sitting and chatting and you’d told me about this place that you’d heard about, and some of the things that were going on for the lesbian women there, and we just thought well, FiLiA has to find a way to help in some way, and we had no idea what we might be able to do, and if we could be useful at all. But it’s been an absolute joy to become friends with the women that we’ve met, the women of course in Africa, and the struggles that they’re experiencing, but also to have this common bond with our international sisters in getting together once a month. I think Tina, as you said, the monthly zoom calls have been really helpful to build that bond between us and get to know each other. And through sharing that has shared out across our FiLiA sisters, it was an absolute joy in 2021 to have some of the sisters from Kakuma speaking at the FiLiA conference, to a room with I think about 1,200 women. You could hear a pin drop, because women were just shocked that this was happening. And I think that’s something that Kenya has been so good at, is keeping this quiet, which makes it so important that we do continue to amplify the voices of the women that have been subjected to the oppression by the Kenyan government, by UNHCR and are still suffering either inside the camp, outside, and in the other countries as well, where they’re struggling. So, I know it’s been difficult, and I have so much respect for the women in the way they’ve stood up with each other, supporting each other. And you’ve heard this afternoon the bonds between them, and the joy that two women - Regina and Julie - have been able to get to a safe place, and the hope that brings to everyone else that that’s coming along soon for them. And from FiLiA’s point of view, it’s just been an absolute privilege knowing all of you, and getting to know you, and we will stay with you until every single one of you is free. And my dream is, seeing you at a FiLiA conference one day. Thanks, Heena.

**Heena Thompson (UK**): Thank you Sally, really appreciate it. And I’m just going to give a small plug to FiLiA 2025 where we are expecting 3,000 women to come, which might be quite an incredible conference (<https://filia.org.uk>). I’m going to call on Kevin who has not yet spoken, if you are there?

**Kevin Proscovia Namugenyi (Kenya)**: Hey everyone, I’m Kevin, nice to meet you, I’m in Nairobi. First of all, I want to thank you international sisters for the love and support, for the endless love and support you’ve shown us. We appreciate it. Thank you for standing with us from 2020 up to now. Like our sisters have said, in Kenya we currently just don’t know who we are, but we are just here. You don’t know if you are here legally, or illegally. We thank God that at least some of us have private sponsorship that are helping us to get to safety. And we are working on it as they are also helping us. So, like they’ve said, the government doesn’t want to give us exit permits. It’s hard, even if you process everything. At least they get something to hold you back, but we thank you very much, sisters, for standing with us. We thank you for the solidarity, the love, the support, and we are glad that we met you and I personally am glad to call you my family, because I’ve never had a family like this, a family that is there in every situation, a family that is supportive in every situation, thank you, and I welcome the new faces, the people I’ve never met, thank you for joining us, we still need more advocacy. We’ve been here for long. I personally have been here since 2019 also, and I’m still struggling though right now I know I’m not alone because I have the support of sisters. And, yeah, thank you very much for loving us.

**Heena Thompson (UK**): Thank you Kevin, really appreciate it, lovely to see you and do take care of yourself. Does anyone have any questions, or something they want to say?

**Corinne Kumar (India):** I have to say a very big thank you to everybody. You know I’ve listened to each one of you, and I know that you have been through so much pain, you are still going through this pain. But I also think that you have learnt to manage this so well, and you are strong, everyone who spoke today. And my heart broke in so many ways, but it also became so strong, looking at you. You know that despite all that you have gone through, you are still able to stand up and speak to everybody. You have got over so many things, and we love you for it. We have groups here in India, the LGBTQI, and many of us work with them. I do not belong to any LGBTQI, but I’ve learned so much from each of you. And today I’ve learned so much, so much from Heena, so much from Rebecca, so much from Sue, so much from Liz, so much from all of you who spoke, because you speak from your heart, and that’s how I love all of you. And I thank all of you. I thank you very much for being who you are.

**Heena Thompson (UK**): Thank you Corinne, that’s so true, the resilience, the strength of the women on this call is phenomenal. It’s really quite amazing, and quite inspiring. And Corinne, thank you for your kind words from India. That’s great, it’s really good, always good to see you.

**Corinne Kumar and Celine Jaya (India):** No, it’s not kind words, you’re teaching everybody, you’re teaching all of us. And you know we have many, many, we have something called the Taranga Guru and there we have mostly it’s transgender women come to us, and they tell us their stories, and they are teaching all of us. And today I wish everybody had heard you because they would have learned so much also about Africa. You know I’ve met two or three of you in Cape Town, I’ve met you Mary Audry, lovely to see you. Thank you so much because I really have learnt so much today. And we’re all with you wherever you are. And if you ever come to India, come to us. Heena, you must do this also, next time in India, you and Rebecca.

**Heena Thompson (UK**): That would be fantastic. Sherry, let me see if you might like to say a few words?

**Sherry Gorelick (USA**): Thank you so much for sharing your struggle. It’s heartbreaking and infuriating that you’re going through what you’re going through. And I want to make two different comments. The first is that I’ve been studying the role of Christian Zionism in the Israeli Palestinian situation, and I believe that it has played a role in Kenya and in the attacks on LGBT people. And at some point it would be great to be examining that, because it’s not just these countries, it’s a larger oppressive movement, and a very wealthy movement.

And then the other comment is completely unrelated to that. I want to thank Heena for being the most radically unassuming political activist I have ever met, and so caring in so many ways, in so many contexts. You’ve been really making this whole conference work, partly behind the scenes, with just the technical aspects of it, and you play such an important role in our lesbian caucus in this radically unassuming way. And I just want to thank you.

**Heena Thompson (UK**): Thank you so much Sherry, quite embarrassed now. Was it Dagmar who also had her hand up?

**Dagmar Schulz (Germany):**  First of all, I want to second what Sherry just said. And you don’t have to be embarrassed, just accept it. You know that you’ve done just wonderful work, and you are a wonderful person. So, enjoy hearing it! I’m sure it’s not going to make you less active, but rather more active. The other thing, I don’t know if this is the time to even address this, this new development that Kenya, and I also heard Sudan, are now not acknowledging, recognising lesbians. I don’t know if also gay men anymore. I mean the situation of not getting exit visas, exit passports, is there any kind of idea on how to approach it? What to do? Because I mean now you are the ones who are still there, you’re in the situation of – like you said – being in a prison. And even worse than before. And you know, our joy about some of you being able to leave, it’s kind of dampened by that. I don’t know if you who are affected by it have any proposals, what we could do?

**Heena Thompson (UK**): So, to move on swiftly from so much love for me, that’s very kind. I just wonder if Anne-Marie is still on the call and if she might like to answer that question, if not, whether Julie has any thoughts or ideas.

**Rebecca Johnson (UK):** I have a question which was to do with what is to follow. One of the first things I want to say is just from my heart, that so many of you have said that you are feeling part of our family, our lesbian family, as Women in Black, and I have to say as well that you are very much part of our family, me and Heena’s family, because although I don’t join all the meetings with you at all, but every meeting that you have with Heena comes back to me in her telling me how you are and what’s going on and we talk about ways we can help more if we can, and we feel so close to you. Even if I personally don’t see you nearly so often, it feels like family. And that’s why I’ll come to my question that follows what Dagmar was saying because I think it’s really important when we heard from Anne-Marie saying that question, you know, ‘So who are we? What is our status? Are we refugees? Are we asylum seekers? Or are we criminals?’ Because that’s what quite a lot of the governments are saying, and treating lesbians and gays particularly as being. And I think we do need to maybe spend the last few minutes we have thinking about how we politically address this, because this is actually getting worse for some of our sisters that we’ve now known for many years. For some, getting asylum, but for others so much worse. Let’s talk about how we can help more. And also politically.

**Hadija (near Kenya)**: Let me answer that question. It is dark here now. As we are right now, we are refugees and we have already done our resettlement interviews, but unfortunately those who have just come to Kenya, they are no longer registering. That’s it. The bad news is where we are right now, we have been here for almost 4-5 months, but they are no longer registering, right now. I don’t want to say, to now, because of the security, this is an unstable country, a country of wars, this country is not safe. But for us who came at first, for the good chance, we got a chance from UNHCR. Maybe not, I don’t know how it came but maybe it was the last ones that we are being registered, and we did our interviews and maybe very soon we will be resettled, everyone, maybe in Canada because some of our friends they have already done the medical. So that’s the good news. But our sisters, yes, they denied to register there. My voice is low because I don’t want people to hear me, what I’m saying. I think you hear me?

**Heena Thompson (UK**): We hear you Hady and thank you so much for trying to speak for all the sisters. I think Anne-Marie had some problems with the network.

**Hadija (near Kenya)**: Yes, we came from Kenya, with my fellow lesbians, but for the good chance we go to where we were registered and we were handled very, very good by UNHCR. And we are being interviewed they did everything they can because they knew each and every thing what was in Kenya, and for good chance immediately we were being registered and all of us were lucky, we are aware of that, and we have already done our resettlement interviews, and some of our fellows, Canada has resettled them and very soon, maybe in this month, they will be travelling. And some of us, we are still waiting for the call from the Embassy. That’s it, but I’m praying for my sisters who are still in Kenya. But I also heard that bad news that there is no more space for them, and here I think, because even those who came for now almost five months, they have denied to register them. I don’t know what they are going to do. Our sisters also need prayers, also us. But at least once or twice some of us escaped. Thank you so much.

**Heena Thompson (UK**): Thank you Hady, really appreciate it. I can see Juliet is wanting to say something, let’s bring Juliet in.

**Juliet (Canada):** Yeah, like our sister Dagmar asked about what can we do about our sisters still in Kenya, to get out, those of them who have private sponsorship the only thing we can do for them is to provide them with the support of getting documents from the Ugandan embassy in Nairobi and with that they can manage to get out. But Kenya has nothing to do with us, even if you get that private sponsorship and everything is done, and you have your visas out, they will expire again and again, and they never do anything. The only option is to get the passports from Uganda through the Embassy, and with that they can manage to get out of Kenya. Yeah, if you got the passport, there’s nothing else to ask you.

**Heena Thompson (UK**): Thank you. I wonder if I can call on Shamim to say a few last words.

**Shamim (near Kenya)**: Thank you so much, sister Helen. I’ll add more on these issues, for some of us who are not guested here.

**Heena Thompson (UK):** Network permitting.Shamim is joining us from a refugee camp in not a very safe part of the world and it is less safe to be a lesbian or gay in that country but the network is down, she’s gone. I believe that’s the time for our meeting today. But Mary, did you want to say something?

**Mary Crampsie (UK)**: Yes, OK, thank you. First of all, thank you to everyone who has spoken, a lot of the information was new to me, but something that Dagmar said triggered a memory about JD Vance, Trump’s Vice-Presidential candidate, and Project 25 in the USA, and it made me think about the project someone talked about working its way through Africa, and it’s quite scary stuff. It’s amazing how many of those organisations are incredibly well funded and have an agenda that they’re trying to foist on all of us. I feel very naïve about all this stuff, I don’t know much about it, but I assume that whoever is involved with UNRWA has a name, and there are named people in Kenya and ministers in Kenya, they are people who are supposed to be responsible. I just wondered if we knew who they were?

**Heena Thompson (UK):** Well certainly we were writing to UNHCR and we were writing to the Head or to various people in UNHCR, and even directly to caseworkers in UNHCR. But there are a number of organisations that are involved in refugee camps. They’re large places, and there’s many NGOs and charities and organisations running it. And then, of course, there’s the governments to hold to account. I’ll stop talking now because I was going to hand over to someone else for the last word: Kevin or Shifra, maybe one of you wanted to say a word about the political situation – I don’t know if your network is good enough for you to be able to come in on any advocacy or anything that you’re wanting to say? I’m not sure if Shifra’s network is going to hold out. Unfortunately, Shifra we can’t hear you. No she might have gone.

**Rebecca Johnson (UK):** First let me say thank you to Heena and all of these amazing, strong, powerful, also vulnerable speakers we have heard today – Shamsa, and Mary Audry and Shifra and Hadija and Juliet, Kevin, all of you who have spoken and shared your experiences with us today. It has been so powerful. It’s so important that we have a lesbian community right across the world, that we build that, that we hold that precious in all of our campaigning, whatever countries we are, whether we have the privilege of being able to have money to offer, or raise money, or whether we are in countries that have the ability to support the refugees, the lesbians in our countries, or in any of these kinds of ways, all of us, there are things we can do. I mean, I was so struck by the women in the refugee camps, how much lesbian solidarity there is with each other! Lesbian and bisexual, they support each other when anything happens. This is also such powerful lesbian solidarity that they look after each other when even terrible things happen like attacks with fire, and they reach out and they support the gay men in the refugee camps. These things are all part of lesbian solidarity amongst ourselves and reaching out to others, and we mustn’t forget that in some countries, two countries where I do a certain amount of work on political issues like nuclear weapons, but very conscious that they still have laws which allow them to kill, and certainly imprison for long times, gay men and lesbian women, particularly if they are identified as actually having sexual relationships, and they try to force some of these lesbians and gay men to gain acceptance in those patriarchal societies, even in Iran I know of at least two cases where money has been offered to gay men to take surgery and hormones to become women, so that they can then be part of the heterosexual, religious norm. Also, for lesbian women, the same kind of thing where there is a push by very patriarchal right wing ideologically religious governments. We always have to be on the lookout for anti-lesbian, anti-gay, anti-bisexual governments and also people within society. All of our societies can mobilise money and ideologies against women’s rights, lesbian rights, gay rights and sometimes even using what in some countries appears to be very progressive trans rights. And some parts of that may be, but this is something we have to keep looking at carefully. Where is the money? What are they demanding? What are they supporting? And as lesbian solidarity we must have a lot of support for our sisters who are put under those pressures, or who choose, for the sake of asylum. We know that some governments will not offer asylum to lesbians, but will offer asylum if they identify as trans, we have to always challenge ways in which power, in governments and in rich civil society, and in other forms of civil society, try to mobilise divisions, but also try to determine who gets to identify who they are, and receive accolades. And this is why I’m so shocked by what Anne-Marie has told us, that lesbians who are lesbians, the government has decided that you’re not lesbians, or that lesbians aren’t disadvantaged, aren’t able to be seeking asylum. So this is my takeaway from this incredibly active, very, very participatory and brave session. For all of you., I want to say thank you for your courage, for your strength, for your honesty. Be who you are, don’t let anyone else tell you, or try to force you, be who you are, and we have to try to build a community that accepts who each and every one of us is in our bodies and our minds, however they are.

**Session13: International Courts of Women Against Wars, For Peace 7.9.2024**

**Speaker: Corinne Kumar**

**Facilitator: Sue Finch**

**Sue Finch (UK):** I feel honoured to introduce Corinne Kumar, who needs no introduction to many of you. Corinne started Women in Black in India in 1993, together with her Vimochana women’s collective, and it spread rapidly across the country. A couple of years later, Corinne initiated the largest ever Women in Black demonstration - 30,000 women - in Beijing in 1995 at the UN world conference of women. Women in Black in India became focused on justice for women – and this led Corinne to create a framework for redressing the wrongs inflicted on women: the Asian Women’s Human Rights Council. One of its core programmes is the **Courts of Women**. These Courts have been held in Cape Town South Africa, the Americas, the Asia Pacific region, Mediterranean countries and so many others. There have been over 50 so far.

Corinne has been at almost all the Women in Black conferences, starting with Novi Sad in 1992, and some of you will remember the wonderful Women in Black conference in India in 2015. We got to see their women’s bookshop, and the women’s crisis centre, a beautiful shelter for 50 women escaping violence. Corinne also organised a **World Court of Women – Against War, for Peace** at that conference, which over 1000 joined. I think some of us had no idea what a World Court was at that point. It doesn’t have judges – it has a jury of women, and all of us listened to devastating testimony from women whose lives had been affected by war and violence – from Iraq, DR Congo, Kashmir, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Palestine, Bosnia, Uganda and many other countries.

Corinne asked me to read out something she had sent me, just before we started today:

‘*War to end war, World War 1, World War 2, cold wars, just wars, wars to end wars, wars to right past wrongs, to the war in Ukraine, and Israel’s war in Palestine today, the world is on the brink yet again of blindly slipping into a global Armageddon. This proves repeatedly that violence and vengeance are treadmills that one cannot get off. The Courts of Women use the measure and metaphor of the feminist sensibility and sensitivity to sieve through the miseries caused by injustice, patriarchy, and its views that engender violence, embedded and manifest. The Courts of Women bring global perspectives to groups engaged in diverse locales and on multitudes of issues. Through the help of testimonies, expert witnesses and learned juries who listen along with all of us, we try to understand the problems through the lives of violated women in great wars as much as in everyday situations such as home and work. In hearing and listening, we also try to find a feminist methodology, resolving those problems. And in so doing, we attempt to find a healing, empathetic way to reimagine justice that seeks to create balance wholes. A world that is human, and humane*’.

The Court of Women in 2015 concluded: ‘*the best way to bring justice to those who’ve testified* . . *about so much loss, is for us together to build a powerful global movement to transform this world’*. Corinne and Vimochana have made a huge contribution to that - and she and Celine have been wonderfully calm and wise supporters of the International Advisory Board for this conference - that Lepa so wisely suggested - as well as finding the lovely Diana to help Yolanda with Spanish interpretation on the day the conference started, which was a miracle! Thank you SO much for everything you’ve done.

**Corinne Kumar (India):** Friends, I’m going to startwith the Courts of Women. But something that comes to my mind now is a little poem that was sung by the mothers of Soweto. They call themselves the storytellers. These were the storytellers from ancient wisdoms, and modern life now. They looked at the children of Soweto, and this was the song they sang them:

 We have entered the night to tell our tale

To listen to those who have not spoken

We who have seen our children die in the morning

Deserve to be listened to

We have looked on blankly as they have opened their wounds

Nothing matters except the grief of the children.

Their tears must be revered, their inner silence speaks louder than the spoken word

And all of being, and all of life, shouts out in outrage.

We must not be rushed to our truths.

*From The Congregation of the Storytellers at the Festival of the Children of Soweto,*

*Mazisi Kunene in her book The Ancestors and the Sacred Mountain (1982).*

But sometimes when I think of Palestine, I think of Ukraine, I think we have to be rushed to our truths. When I think of the Congo, of everything that I heard last night, I think that we have to be rushed to our truths. Because whatever we have failed to say is stored secretly in our minds. And all those processions of embittered crowds have seen us lead them 1000 times. We can hear the story over and over and over again. Our minds are muted beyond sadness. And there is nothing more that we can feel. It’s true friends that you and I live in very violent times. Times in which our community and our collective memories are dying. Times in which we are increasingly fragmenting. Times that are collapsing the many life visions into a singly cosmology, into a single world view that has created its own universal truths. Truths of equality, of development, of peace, even of security. Truths that are inherently discriminatory, even violent. But truths that have created a development model that dispossess the majority. Times that have desacralized nature, that destroy whole cultures and civilisations, that denigrate and devalue the women. Times in which the War on Terrorism brings a time of violent uncertainty, of brutal wars for resources, for diamonds, for oil, for minerals, for land. One thinks of the war of Occupation. Wars that of course, with the terrorism that’s going global, and franchised to all the world over. Times, I think of the Iraq war in 2003, giving us new words today: the pre-emptive strike, collateral damage – what is collateral damage? Embedded journalism, enemy combatants, military tribunals, even rendition. New words, but these words are soaked in blood.

Times in which the dominant political thinking instruments of justice are hardly able to address the violence that is not only escalating but also intensifying. Times in which progress presupposes the genocide of the many. The gendercide of the women. Times in which the violence is taking newer, more contemporary forms. Cyberstalking, cybercrimes, times in which human rights have come to mean the rights of the privileged, and the rights of the powerful. And for the Masters to have their human rights, their freedoms, they must surrender the most human right of all, which is the right to be human. Times in which the political space for the other is diminishing, even closing. Times that are destroying diversity as the world moves towards the one side, the one notion of progress, the one development model. Let’s not forget the one single story, the one single mountain.

The world, it would seem, is almost at the end of its imagination. Who will deny that we do not need another imaginary? Perhaps it is in this moment, when existing systems of meaning fragment, that we may search for new meaning. Only the imagination stands between us and fear. And fear makes us think like sheep when we should in fact dream like poets. It’s not difficult then, friends, for us to see that we are at the end of an epoch. When every old category begins to have a hollow sound. And when we are groping in the dark to discover the new. Can we find new words? Can we search new ways? Can we create out of the material of the human spirit possibilities to transform the existing exploitative social order? All this to discern, in fact, the greater human potential. What we need in the world is a new universalism. Not universalisms that deny the many and affirm the one. Not universalisms that are born of eurocentricities, but universalisms that recognise the specific idioms in the world. Let me explain that. Universalisms that will not deny the accumulated experiences and knowledge of past generations, but ones that will accept them as imposition, and will not accept the imposition of any monolithic structures under which it is presumed that all other peoples, all other cultures, all other civilisations must be subsumed. New universalisms, then, that will challenge the universal mode, the logic of new development, the logic of science, the logic of technology, the logic of patriarchy, militarisation, war.

A new universalism that will respect the plurality of the different societies, and of their philosophies. One that will be rooted in the particular and the vernacular, one which will find a residence in the different civilisations, giving birth to new world views, birthing new cosmologies. This could be, I remember I wrote this many years ago, when I was talking about the new South, but I also called the new South the South wind. Because you know at this time, we were always told we were the Third World – Asia, Africa, Latin America, the Arab World, the Pacific. These were the Third World countries that were undeveloped, poor countries, and were often referred to as The South. But I wanted to give a new meaning to The South, and I called it the South wind at this time, which I found could rise in all its grandeur, bringing much to this cosmology. The South wind, the South therefore, in a different way, as a movement for change in the world, and we have so many movements for change in the world today. The South is the voices and movements of peoples on the edges. We are all peoples of the edges. Wherever these movements unfold, the South therefore as the visions of women. The South is the development of new frameworks, seeking a new language of what it perceives, rupturing the existing theoretical categories, breaking the mind constructs. Challenging the one ‘objective’ worldview as the only worldview. The South wind then, if I may call it the South wind, is the seeking of new knowledges, refusing the one mechanistic scientific knowledge as the only legitimate knowledge. The South wind, then, as the discovery of other knowledges that have been silenced. The South, then, as finding new definitions of politics of knowledge, creating therefore a new paradigm of knowledge, and a new paradigm of politics. The South must reclaim back the subjective and the objective modes of knowing, creating richer and deeper structures of knowledge in which the observer is not distanced from the observed, the researcher from the research, poverty from the poor.

How can we separate? We can’t separate the dancers from the dance, but I’ll come back to that. The new cosmology will move away from the Eurocentric methodology which observes and describes. We need to deconstruct the dominant discourse, the dominant mythology. The South wind invites us to a new spectrum of methods which depart from a linear mode of thought and perception to one that is more holistic. It urges us to search for qualitative methodologies in oral history, an experiential analysis in action research, so often I think in poetry, in myth, in metaphor, in magic. So, the South wind invites us to a way of knowing that refuses to exploit and control nature, to use and abuse nature, but one that finds our connectedness to nature. To place together these fragments, to discern the essence, to move into another space, another time, recapturing hidden knowledges, regenerating forgotten spaces, refining other cosmologies, renewing the future. It is here perhaps that the notion of the sacred, and the world views of these cultures and knowledges and wisdom of these peoples of the peripheries that we must seek the beginning of an alternative course.

The South then invites us to another human rights discourse, one that will not be trapped in the universal of the dominant discourse, tied as it is to the market economy of monoculturalism, a material ethic, and the politics and polity of the nation state. Or in the discourse of the culture specific, but one that prefers universalisms that have been born out of the dialogue of civilisations. We need then to find new perspectives of the universality of human rights, in dialogue of other cultural perspectives of reality, other notions of development, democracy, other notions of dissent, other concepts of power and governance. Other notions of equality, of equity, of dignity. Other concepts of justice, because humankind offers us many horizons of discourse. Our imaginaries must be different. We need to imagine alternative visions for change. A new vision that would evolve out of conversations across cultures and traditions. Conversations and enquiries, conceivably happening in a framework of exchange, mutuality and equity, rather appropriate conversations that are not mediated by the universal discourse. But this will mean another ethic of dialogue. The world of human rights, for instance, needs to be infused with an ethic of care. Can you see what I’m saying? The world of rights needs to be infused with an ethic of care.

Perhaps, as the poet said, we should now break the routine, do an extravagant action that would change the course of history. What is essential is to go beyond the politics of violence and terror of the times, and to find new imaginations, to sing our root song. Finding even vestiges of this can reveal universes that have escaped the master narrative of our times. To begin to touch the dream is to move outside the universal, outside the Eurocentric, outside the racial, outside the patriarchal pattern, to search for new concepts that would explain our lives and experiences. To search for new meanings, to discover fresh spaces, and to witness a new surge of life. As I’ve said before, support for women is a new space for reflection, for learning, for conversation, for dialogue. Too often, intercultural dialogues take place, and knowledge gets produced in spaces that are designed and crafted by the dominant discourse. A discourse that has hierarchical cultures and knowledge systems through universalising key cultural, social and political constructs. Constructs such as democracy, development, human rights, freedom, equality that have been used by the globalising North to subdue and to subsume the life systems and the world views of the global South, while universalising a way of life that today has become the new global social order, world order. The world order in which the South, the victim, the feminine, the rural, the indigenous - vis-à-vis the North, the victor, the masculine, the urban, the secular, the universal. An order in which polarised, oppositional thought determines the terms of any dialogue between differing and different cultures. We know that there is a North in the South, and a South in the North.

We need therefore to redesign, to recraft in many ways, spaces for dialogue and learning, where people of the global South are subjects of their own history, writing their own narrative, offering new universals. Only then, with such dialogue and learning processes, can we challenge and transform the dominant discourse while enriching those who are in conversation across cultures, across civilisations. But this will mean another ethical dialogue, almost another ethic of dialogue. Rebecca said I must tell a story, so I’ll talk about spaces inspired by the story of Black Elk, an old woman. She was an indigenous woman, a wise woman, of course, and she tells the story of her and her sacred mountain. In a different place and a different time, Black Elk heard the song of the wind. ‘I saw myself on the central mountain of the world, the highest place, and I had a vision because I was seeing in the sacred manner of the world’ she said. Remember, she said she was seeing in the sacred manner of the world. And the sacred central mountain was a mountain in her part of the world. The story invites us to another way of seeing, another way of knowing, knowing that often when our eyes cannot see horizons it does not mean that these horizons do not exist. The peasants in Chiapas, Mexico, sum up their vision that does not offer clear, rigid, universal truths, in three little words. That’s the core of their vision. ‘Asking, we walk’. And that’s the title of the books that I have edited and have taken from the peasants in Chiapas: Asking, we walk. The asking in itself challenges Master narratives, Master’s houses, houses of reason, universal truths of power, politics, patriarchy. Truths of the one imperial medicine, of the one science, of the one development, the one democracy, the one knowledge, the one sacred mountain of Black Elk. And all other sacred mountains, their cultures, their civilisations, their knowledges, have to be measured vis-à-vis the sacred mountain. I used to say then the West, but now I say, that’s the North. There is an urgent need to challenge the centralising logic of the master narrative, the sacred mountain implicit in the dominant discourses. The dominant discourse of class, of caste, of race, of gender. Therefore, for gathering, the next time we should gather on a mountain, for gathering on a mountain also allows us to go to be still, and to go to that place inside of us where movement and stillness can come together and we listen to our inner voices, to each other, and to the sacred, and the sacred mountain.

When we speak in the Courts of Women, while we speak truth to power, we are also speaking to those who use, misuse, even abuse power, yet also speaking truth to those who are powerless. The Blacks, the indigenous, the tribals, the Dalits, the women, marginalised and oppressed peoples everywhere. People with no power, the nameless, the faceless, the rightless, the voiceless. Ours is a journey of the peripheries of power. The power itself is being woven from the fabric of powerlessness. The power itself is being woven from the fabric of powerlessness. That must give us power, although we must speak too of another notion of justice, of a jurisprudence by bringing individual and collective justice and reparation that will also transform us all. A jurisprudence that is able to contextualise and historicise the crime, moving away from a justice with punishment, a justice of revenge, a retributive justice, to a justice seeking redress, even reparation. A justice with truth and reconciliation, a restorative justice, a justice with healing, healing of individuals and communities. Can I ask the question, because it comes from the Courts of Women: Can the tears, can the narratives of the women, and other oppressed peoples, can these sites of pain, these sites of devastation and destitution, lead us to rethinking and reimagining another way to justice? What ideas and sensibilities do we need to explore to expand the imagination of justice? Refusing to separate the effective from the rational creates a space in which emotive demands are allowed to be voiced, and collective trauma can be understood.

This can be a step towards reimagining this jurisprudence from civil society, in which we are able to creatively connect and deepen our collective insights and understanding of the context in which the text of our everyday lives is written. We need to imagine just as differently, for this imaginary cannot have its moorings in the dominant discourse but must seek to locate itself in a discourse of dissent that comes from a deep critique of the different forms of domination and violence in our times. Any new imaginary cannot be tied to the dominant discourse and systems of violence and exclusion. Perhaps it is in the expression of resistance, seeking legitimacy not by the dominant standards, not by the dominant paradigm of jurisprudence, not by the rule of law, but by beginning to draw the contours of a new political imaginary, the truth commissions, the public hearings, the people’s tribunals, the Courts of Women, are expressions of a new imaginary, refusing that human rights be defined and confined by the dominant hegemonic paradigm. Only the imagination stands between us and fear. Fear makes us behave like sheep when we should be dreaming like poets. I want to say just a little bit more. The story of the Courts of Women invites us to the decolonisation of our structures, our minds, and our imaginations.

When I think of India, I think this is what the British did. They thought they controlled us with the political economy that they brought in. But they also colonised our minds. And more than our minds, our imaginations. Our minds and imaginations, subsumed cultures, subjugated peoples, silenced women, reclaiming their political voice and breaking the silence, refusing the conditions by which power hegemonizes. The Courts of Women we need to imagine just as differently. I’ll end with this: we need to imagine justice differently, because the World Courts of Women, they not only interrupt, but they disrupt, and they are speaking to this disruption, to this trespass if you like. Because the Courts of Women are finding new paradigms of knowledge, and new paradigms of politics. A politics with care, concern, community, connectedness. And a politics with ethics, a political vision that can then transform us all. We need a definitely different dream. Violence against women in all its myriad forms must be made unthinkable. We need to invite each other to this different dream. The Courts of Women ask us to imagine other ways to justice, subverting political discourse. Subverting not only political discourse, but racist discourse and praxis, trespassing untread terrain. Weaving subjective text with objective context, moving us to deeper layers of knowing, of telling, weaving not only objective with subjective, but logic with lyrics, the personal with the political, the rational with the intuitive, but the rational also with compassion. Moving us, then, to different kinds of ways of understanding, of knowings and tellings, refusing to separate the dancer from the dance. I said I’d come back to this, knowing that we are the dancers, but knowing also that we are the dance.

**Sue Finch (UK):** Thank you so much, that was a dance and a storytelling, beautiful. The latest message in the chat says ‘Corinne, thank you, I found so much wisdom and beauty in your words. You bring hope. I’d like to know more about the Courts of Women, how they were brought into existence, and what happens when they meet?’ A very practical question from Marie Walsh in Oxfordshire.

**Corinne Kumar (India):** You know, I just want to thank you Marie, but I had a little poem, a little story that I want to tell because it tells you a little about where the Courts started. And this is the story - I come to India now - about timelessness, about another imaginary almost. It’s a story from Rabindranath Tagore, our great poet and writer from West Bengal. He writes in his book *The Riches of the Poor* the story of the Lord Buddha when once upon a time - and yesterday also - it was a time of darkness, and it was also a time of famine that was devastating the land. People gathered all around to listen to Buddha, and these people gathered – poor people, hungry people. Lord Buddha, looking around, asked his disciples ‘who will feed these people, who will take care of them? Who will bring them food?’ And he looked around, and he saw a banker, and he waited for an answer, and the banker said ’But how much more than all the wealth I have would be needed to feed these hungry people? My Lord, what can I do.’ Then Lord Buddha looked at the Chief of the King’s army, and he said very quickly ‘Oh My Lord, I would have given you all that I have, I would have given you my life also. But there is not enough food in my house’. Then he, who was possessed of large pastures, sighed and he said ‘The God of the wind has dried our fields, and I do not know what I shall do to even pay the king’s taxes’. The people listened, and they were so hungry. And Supriya, the beggar’s daughter, was sitting right at the back of the gathering, listening as she raised her hand and stood up and said: ‘I will take care of these people’. How would she, they thought, do this? After all, she’s only a beggar’s daughter, with no material wealth. How would she accomplish this? How would she do this? They chorused: ‘How will you do this?’ Supriya, gentle and strong, looked at the gathering and said ‘It’s true that I am the poorest among you. But therein is my strength, my treasure and my affluence, which I will find at each of your doors’. This is what I’m saying, Marie: Supriya’s words came from another logic. She refuses the logic of property, of profit, of patriarchy, inviting us to another ethic of care. She sees the poor as a community of people, with dignity in a relational way, not as individual separate units. And speaks for the many all over the world who are challenging the logic of the Master’s imaginary, and trying to find and rebuild communities, regenerating women’s knowledges and wisdom. Refining the dream for us all.

We need to subvert patriarchal discourse and stress trespassing untread terrain. Weaving subject with text, with testimony. This is why I keep saying that we must reimagine justice, because by reimagining justice we are preaching the Courts of Women. And that’s what we have been trying to do in the 50 Courts that we have had, where the jury are not people who are judges, are not people who have studied the law, who are not academic people, but people who have been judges like Fatima Meer and Desmond Tutu, from South Africa, like Ramsay Clark who’s a former US Attorney General and then he left Iraq, like Ibu from Indonesia, we have had so many good judges. And these judges, they speak, but they do not speak the language of legalese, as all lawyers speak to us in legalese when you go to them with any problem that you have. They see much more than that, they see outside the political paradigm, they look at justice, then justice can come from within. Do you want me to talk more about the Courts? No – it’s too long!

**Sue Finch (UK):** Please, carry on – everyone is putting in the chat ‘We love you Corinne, keep talking!’

**Marie Walsh (UK):** I would love to hear how the Courts got started. It seems such a wonderful idea! I’ve never heard of it before this weekend.

**Corinne Kumar (India):** You know Marie, we started this in 1992. We did the first Court in Pakistan. I was with the Asian Women’s Human Rights Council, and Vimochana, and we started this Court in Pakistan with SIMORGH (Women’s Resource and Publication Centre), our partner organisation in Lahore. And they were so excited about this, they said we are going to do our Court in 1992. In 1993 we did the Comfort Women Court in Japan. So SIMORGH got us a foyer in a hotel, where 500 women sat down, and we sat there for three or five days. And what they brought there was something amazing, you know it was the first time that group of women were speaking about violence against women. I can tell you the testimony of one woman who came, her name was Mujiba, she was completely covered in a whole hijab, her face and everything had a veil, and she told us the story of the violence against her. She was married, and she told us all the story of everything he promised her, and then one day he came to her and said, ‘I want to divorce you, I do not need you anymore.’ So she said, ‘but why, why are you divorcing me?’ Before she could even finish saying this, he said it three times again, ripped her veil off, and threw acid in her face. At this moment she dropped her veil to us, and all we could see was so terrible, she just had two little holes for her to breathe. And that was almost one of the first testimonies that I had heard outside of India, and somebody asked her afterwards ‘Why did you do that?’ and she said, ‘Because I want you all to know what happens to women in Pakistan’. We have many kinds of burnings, we’ve had dowry burnings, beatings, batterings, every day we have hundreds of women coming here burned by fire, and they’ve started with acid also, but in Pakistan they burn with acid. So we felt so strongly about this.

But the other Court was the Comfort Women, I had two very good Asian colleagues, and they started to write to me in 1992 to ask if I had ever heard the Comfort Women’s story? Everything was new to me in 1992, and I said ‘No’ and they kept sending me stories of the Comfort Women in the Second World War, Filipino Comfort Women. You know the Japanese army invaded Asia, and they just used to capture 12, 13, 14-year-olds, then take them to their military bases and rape them. The girls were there to bring comfort to the Japanese soldiers, that’s why they were called Comfort Women. So we started to work in 1992, and in 1993 we got in touch with many of the Japanese groups, and we decided we were going to hold a Court of Women in Japan in 1993. The Comfort Women were coming from the Philippines, and my two colleagues from there were bringing them. There was one in particular I remember, her name was Lola, she was a grandmother, my colleague had told her that she had to speak in Japan, but it was in a huge hall where 2000 women sat. Everyone thought this was an education meeting, because that was the only way we could get into Japan. All of us were educators, so it’s an education. The Women’s Courts are education. I happened to be on the jury that time, because the Courts were very new, we didn’t even know what we were doing at this time. And as I sat there, I noticed that nobody moves in Japan, the most beautiful audience we have ever had in all the Courts that we have done. But however, when Lola got up to speak, and I had given her 10-15 minutes to speak her story, we were all waiting for her, and she never said a word. And 10 minutes went, and 15 minutes went. And I just wrote, maybe we should ask her to come down, and when she is ready, she can come up again, when suddenly she started whistling a bar of music. And then she whistled the second bar. And then she whistled the whole song, then she told us, she took the microphone and she said ‘I am Lola, and this is what he used to whistle every night as he crossed that bridge to rape me. Not him, 12 of them, 14 of them’.

These are some stories which I also heard yesterday, and you know there are so many stories, so many of you there in Women in Black, we can do a Court. We can do Courts all over. We can do a Court of Women in Black, as we had in 2015. But we can do this again. Maybe you can. I thought of this in the last session I heard yesterday, we can do a Court on LGBTQ. We can do a Court of Women for Palestine, I think that Palestinians need to be heard all over the world, because they are not heard. The media that comes to us only speaks about Israel, speaks about the Israeli hostages, and I’m very sad about that. But there is so much more happening with the Palestinians, we can do a Court with Palestinians. We can do a Court with Ukraine, and Russia also. We can do a Court on Africa. We can do a Court in India, you know, I said to my colleagues we could do a Court in every state. We have the state of Karnataka here, the state of Maharashtra, the state of Jammu and Kashmir – everywhere, in Gujarat also, we should do these. Because this will, and it has done for us, document all these stories. So, we have many, many stories – each Court has 30, 35 or 40 stories sometimes, and these are testimonies that women have brought, and they are all live testimonies. It is what she has gone through. This gives another kind of credibility and integrity also to the Courts of Women.

**Sue Finch (UK):** Thank you so much Corinne. Can I ask, with the Comfort Women, did you eventually get an apology from the Japanese Government? And maybe reparations?

**Corinne Kumar (India):** We did this in 1993, and after that we took all the testimonies of the women to the UN Human Rights Commission, and we were there, especially my colleague from the Philippines, and every time they sat the Comfort Women would be there, and they held big demonstrations. They held other meetings with other Heads of governments, all kinds of things they did. Every time they started the Japanese delegation would just walk out. Then in 1996 or 7 I think it was, years after, they started what they called the Japanese Comfort Women’s Fund, and they offered anybody who came 20,000 Yen, I think it was, but only if they could prove themselves that they had been Comfort Women. You know they made it so difficult. The Emperor of Japan, I think, acknowledged the Comfort Women’s story, they had to acknowledge it. But they did nothing like telling the children in school, telling everyone else that this was part of the Japanese war. I don’t think they went very far with that. But we felt happy that they had started some sort of fund for the Japanese Comfort Women, and some women that were taken to Japan from Korea, the Philippines, and Indonesia. People like this did get some money.

**Rebecca Johnson (UK):** That is so extraordinary, so beautiful, you are such an activist and poet, and the two are so inextricably connected in you as a woman and an activist and an analyst, and I love that. I was on the jury for the Court of Women in Bangalore, and it was an incredible experience – and we brought back some of your wonderful publications. Thank you so much for sharing this with us.

**Corinne Kumar (India):** It only became possible because all of you were there, the people on the juries, the people who gave testimonies, the experts and the analysts also. And then we had the poetry, and the song and the dance right through. This is always to move from the extreme pain that you’re feeling to the hope, so we try to do that in one day, to have the pain, and also to pass to the celebration of life. Because the celebration of life is something that all of us must know, and all of us do.

**Jadranka Milicevic (Bosnia Herzegovina)**: Hello to everybody, hello Corinne. Can you believe it was 1997 when I first met you Corinne and heard about the Women’s Courts? For us it was very important in Bosnia Herzegovina, and we held a Women’s Court in Sarajevo in 2015. We in Bosnia Herzegovina continue to work around this topic and have written books to also include women’s stories who could not take part in the Court, about how we survived war, and after war and how important it is to open space for women to talk. After the start of the war in Ukraine, we have had the opportunity to host some women from Ukraine and to talk more about our experiences, and how important it is to write and talk about them and try to push governments to respect what all women survive and have survived. Especially, Corinne, when you talk about Palestine and all other wars, what is happening, we must support and continue work around Women’s Courts. And now I have the opportunity to be going to a very big conference in the Mediterranean area, and it’s very important to open space for Women’s Testimony, and Women’s Court.

**Sue Finch (UK)**: Corinne, we have a question about the books that you published. Can anyone get them from you?

**Corinne Kumar (India):** Yes, you can. Anyone who is interested in the books, I would send it to them, but you’d have to pay me the mailing costs, and for the books also. I’ve given the books to Vimochana, so it can go from there. You just have to write me, you have my email, or call me – 918861784194!

**Concha Martin (Spain):** I want to send my love to Corinne and Celine and all of youand to say thank you for your wonderful speech, it is so inspiring as always. We have to change our way of living, it will be so good to have the next conference in Colombia in the global South. Corinne, please take care, we need you. And I have the four Asking We Walk books from Corinne, so I can lend them to women. So beautiful, so strong, thank you!

**Kirsten Campbell (UK):** I just want to say thank you so much to Corinne, and to say how important this information about Women’s Courts is, and how we can engage the next generation of young women activists with the work of the Courts. I was too shy to say how important your work has been to me.

**Corinne Kumar (India)**: We can do so much with Women in Black! When we had the Court in South Africa in 2001, Desmond Tutu used to say he wouldn’t come – then I got a call to say he was waiting to come in! I asked him if he thought the Court of Women should be there, because he had just finished the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. He said at the Commission many women spoke, as wives, as mothers and more. But at the Women’s Court the 5000 women there talked about the violence that was done to them, and that was very different. It’s time that half the world is included. Women in Black may be small, but the networks are so good.

**Sue Finch (UK)**: The next question in the chat from Mary and Marie: is there are another Court of Women planned?

**Corinne Kumar (India):** You can plan it where you are – in England! At the moment we are doing a series on the effects of Covid, but we are open to helping to organise Courts of Women wherever you want!

**Sue Finch (UK):** If Corinne agrees with the recording of the session, we can use it as an organising tool.

**Rebecca Johnson (UK):** We could organise meetings perhaps once a month to bring all these amazing women’s groups and activists and issues together, and I could offer to help host. It’s wonderful that Colombia has volunteered to organise the next conference, but not everyone will be able to go, and there are the effects on the climate to consider. Thank you so much for your wonderful session, Corinne, and to all of you.

**Session 14: Women’s Activism to Stop the War on Gaza 7.9.2024**

**Facilitator: Miri Weingarten**

**Miri Weingarten**: Thank you so much for inviting me, it’s great to see so many of you here, and I recognize lots of faces from the vigil in Euston, it has been good to get to know you, one of the unexpectedly good results of having to be politically active in this terrible context. To just briefly introduce myself, I was born within Israel, I’m Jewish Israeli, I left about 20 years ago. I continued to be active on the issue of Palestinian rights and human rights, after leaving for a number of years, but then more recently became a lawyer in a human rights legal aid law firm here in London, that’s the context I come from. Currently I manage a small charitable foundation. I’ll talk later about the reasons and the context for the new vigils in London after October 7, but first just to give a bit of a frame for this session which is called Women’s Activism to Stop the War on Gaza. As I see it, this women’s activism can come from at least three perspectives: The first perspective, the perspective of Palestinians living under Occupation, has already been aired and shared in the first session of this conference which some of you will have attended last week, an important key perspective from which to listen to these issues. The second perspective from which we can discuss women’s activism is the global solidarity perspective of people outside the Middle East looking inward and thinking and wondering what it is they can do in solidarity in this situation. And the third perspective is the perspective we are opening with now, which is the perspective of Jewish Israelis who are resisting the Occupation from within Israeli society. And that is historically the perspective from which Women in Black began back in 1988, during the first Intifada in which Israeli and Palestinian women inside Israel stood together in the Israeli street, as it were troubling the public sphere by placing their bodies in a feminist, anti-militarist way, in the public sphere, and obviously receiving all the various responses to that, but also troubling that surface and challenging it. In 1988 the idea of the WiB vigils was the protest against Occupation, the solidarity with Palestinians under Occupation, and the protest against the violent repression of that mass popular movement for liberation at that time, the first intifada of 1987. And it’s very sobering to look at all the years that have passed since 1988 to today, in that situation that we are in today. But still what Israeli protest does is to unravel the consensus in what it a deeply ideologized and militarised society. So that’s why I’m really glad to be able to introduce our contributors who have agreed to speak a little about what is happening today in Israeli dissent. This is something that’s less heard of publicly, globally, and I’m sure that the people who are here are eager to hear about it. So the first Jewish Israeli speaker that I’m inviting is **Rela Mazali,** a veteran Jewish Israeli peace activist and feminist writer. She is a co-founder of the antimilitarist movement *New Profile*, she is also the founder of *Gun Free Kitchen Tables*, which promotes disarmament and gun control within Israeli society.

**Rela Mazali (Israel):** Thank you a lot for joining us, and my very, very warm thanks tothe organisers, and to Miri. In feminist recognition of the power of naming, I want to start with this: it’s important to name genocide. The state of Israel and its army are perpetrating genocide against the people of Palestine. I’m not a scholar of genocide, but I’ve read and considered definitions and qualifying conditions and many reports, and following many people who are experts and scholars I name Israel’s actions genocide. I won’t argue the relevant points. You can read, for instance, the UN Special Rapporteur on the occupied Palestinian territories, Francesca Albanese, or the genocide scholars Raz Segal and Omar Bartov who are both originally from Israel, and many others. Outrageously in today’s world this is not the only militarised violence viewed as a genocide in progress. But I personally have a particular civic responsibility to name this genocide as a citizen, and a citizen of the perpetrating state. My citizenship and membership of this society - however critical and dissenting and alienated – afford me a direct right and an obligation to hold this state and its society accountable. Among other things, naming is a call to action. And I’ll very briefly sketch some of the action I’m involved with towards ending Israel’s warfare and containing the spread of armed violence. None of this action is new. But its relevance has increased dramatically during this horrific peak of militarised violence. I do resistance work through two main channels. Both of these are fundamentally feminist and anti-militarist. Each addresses an aspect of the colonial settler society structure that feeds continuing warfare throughout historic Palestine. Militarisation, war and armaments are embedded in most colonial structures. They serve to implement supremacist, racist ideologies which unfailingly are also misogynist. Both the frameworks I’m active with work for change within this deeply militarised society and firstly within Israel’s Jewish society. I’m very moved to share this venue with Dana Yair who will introduce one of these channels, New Profile, founded in 1998 by a group of feminist women, including myself. So I’ll leave it to Dana to talk about New Profile.

The other channel of resistance I work with is Gun Free Kitchen Tables, a project of Isha L’Isha Feminist Centre, leading a coalition of 20 women’s and civil society organisations in Israel under the same name. Gun Free Kitchen Tables addresses the hardware central to the day-to-day performance of militarisation and supremacy. That is, guns. Guns, merely by their presence, can exercise what scholars have called coercive control. They threaten, terrorize, very easily kill and injure collectives and individuals in territories, communities and homes. Along the continuum of violence that militarisation generates and escalates, the coalition works to disarm civil spaces locally and provoke preventive gun policies. This past year has seen previous modest, but real, successes totally overridden. Alongside Israel’s genocide we are witnessing unprecedented levels of government driven civil armament. The horrors of the Hamas attack on October 7 provided the perfect pretext to hand out guns wholesale to Jewish Israelis, mostly men, and to radically privatise civilian security. Private gun ownership in the country was up 40% by the end of 2023, with an unreported number of new organisational gun bearers deployed by over 1000 civilian companies. Simultaneously the military armed 13,000 volunteers for almost 1000 new community security squads nationwide. And these need to be added to the guns carried by hundreds of thousands of reserve troops going in and out of Gaza, in and out of the West Bank, and tens of thousands of policemen. All these guns are aimed first and foremost at Israel’s Palestinian citizens. You may be aware that West Bank citizens in Jenin, Tulkarem, the South Hebron Hills are already facing onslaughts increasingly similar to those in Gaza. Civilian armament inside the Jewish state deploys a different means to turn the attack inwards on Palestinians as well. This week, for instance, the State Prosecutor announced the release without trial of a Jewish Israeli who in February had, for all practical purposes, summarily executed a young Palestinian citizen caught jumping the fence into a Jewish community. Also this week two Palestinian citizens were stopped on the road by a military patrol and brutally beaten at gunpoint, inside Israel.

Meanwhile decades of selective policing have channelled large number of unlicensed guns, largely stolen from licensed sources, into the hands of criminal groups, most of which are Palestinian citizens who accordingly also form a large majority of the country’s murder victims. The number of gun murders doubled from 2021 to 2023, with a near 10% rise in their proportion out of all murders. All the women murdered with guns last year were Palestinian citizens. Here, as elsewhere, guns in homes post much increased risks for women, while men are most at risk in the public sphere. As I hope this overview indicates, mass civilian armament is potentially galvanising civil war. The picture as a whole is reminiscent of South Africa, where in 1986 Jacqueline Koch described how surrogate forces in the form of vigilantes and municipal constables came to be agents of violence and fear, creating a pattern of indiscriminate violence. Here, civic spaces are increasingly suited to the control of agents and symbols of organised violence. Addressing this reality, Gun Free Kitchen Tables maintains close coordination with our sister coalition, Women Against Weapons, and its work to stem gun violence among Israel’s Palestinian citizenry. At the same time, we call on the civic collective, more than the extremist government, to plan civilian disarmament, along with a return to relative calm. We advocate for an expiration date to civilian armament, to restore civic spaces and start building actual democratic accountability. Thank you.

**Miri Weingarten:** Thank you very much. It’s very sobering that even when we are exposed to what is happening in Gaza, in the West Bank, and we think that we know things that are happening, we can always discover more detail about the militarisation processes of Israeli society. It gives us, possibly, a way of imagining systemic change rather than just a ceasefire now. If this genocide does pause, what then is needed after that?

I’d like to inviteour second speaker**, Dana Yair,** who leads on education and outreach for the Israeli movement *New Profile*, which supports conscientious objectors and draft resisters in Israel.

**Dana Yair:** Thank you, I want to talk a little bit about what *New Profile* is doing in Israel, and also a little bit about militarisation in Israeli society, especially in time of war.*New Profile* is a feminist organisation that acts to reduce the military influence on Israeli civic society. We seek to promote peace and non-violence and democratic society. We do this through a few channels. One of them is the education and outreach programmes that I am doing, mostly by giving lectures, organising events etc. The other channel, the main one, is the counselling network. We counsel all kinds of people, mainly those who don’t want to join the army, and give them legal advice and support them through all the procedures they have to go through. Another project that we have is a database of Israeli military and security exports, with a lot of information about the countries that Israel exports to, you can see this on our DIMSE website. It’s a very good source of information. We also produce and distribute research, for example about militarism in the universities, and the connections between the army and the government and the universities and how this affects students and the curriculum. We try to talk about militarism and how it is affecting the society in everyday life. I just moved to Greece, and I talk to people here, and there is a big difference that you can see in Europe. Here in Greece there is compulsory military service, but a lot of people are resisting on the basis of its not something they want to do. In Israel it’s a totally different thing, and not going into the army is seen as a mark of shame, something that is not acceptable, that takes you out of the mainstream of society. We know this from kindergarten, but not everyone understands from outside Israel. The military affects us in every step of our life, it’s inside of us. (Showed photos of tiny children signing bombs, wrapping presents for soldiers). Since we were kids we are educated to think that war is something that we want. We are educated to war in kindergartens, schools, and universities. If people were educated for peace instead of war, we would have more peace. We are educated to protect our country, but protecting our country is seen as violently protecting – if you really want to protect, peace is the way.

Militarism is a part of our everyday life. It’s now mainstream fashion for the bride and groom to wear guns and ammunition at weddings in Israel (Dana showed photos). Militarism and society are the same. People outside of this are seen as outside of the mainstream, not accepted for jobs etc. For many years I was afraid to say that I didn’t go into the army, that I refused, and I was afraid I wouldn’t be accepted for jobs. A lot of ceremonies/memorial days that are part of our lives and schools reinforce the value of self-sacrifice. Teenagers are not into politics, but into being heroes – and saving everybody. People will die and kill blindly. Killing, and being at war, is seen as ‘security’. People say: ‘what else can we do? We need to protect ourselves.’ This sentence you will hear a lot here. Even worse since 7th October. It’s seen as radical to think that peace will bring security. People really wanted war after 7.10 but now, after a year of this battle, they are starting to see that this is not a solution. I hope that step by step, this will lead to something else, a peace process, or something that can actually end this war. And people are starting to understand that they cannot be in war forever. They are tired of it, and they want to stop the war.

**Miri Weingarten:** Thank you so much, you really gave us a deep look into a world that is difficult to imagine from outside. The people listening here have a complex analysis, definitions of Occupation, Apartheid and as Rela said, Genocide as well, and its important to understand how far away that is from the way ordinary Israelis are brought up in a depoliticised but ideologized way. So they see what left-wing activists abroad would call Apartheid and oppression as security, starting from a very, very young age. This is the nature of ideology. Does anyone have any questions?

**Marie Walsh (UK):** Thank you for those really eye-opening contributions. My question is about how leaders sometimes use war to strengthen their own position. We saw this in the UK when Margaret Thatcher was in our government and was not so popular, then started the ‘Falklands’ war and suddenly the media supported her and she got four more years in power. We see it in Russia, where Putin has strengthened his hand by invading Ukraine. I wonder if Israeli people have a sense that Netanyahu is doing the same thing? He was under pressure for corruption, and so on. I wonder if anyone sees that some of his belligerent attitude is about saving his own skin, politically and personally?

**Rela Mazali (Israel)**: Well, yeah, there’s a lot of that here actually. Even what I would call the ‘so-called’ left claims that. It’s ‘so-called’ because it isn’t part of the political map that actually sees ruling another people and dispossessing other people and Jewish supremacy as a root problem. It’s a part of a polity that sees the current government and Netanyahu as a main problem. And you get a lot of that, that he’s using this to survive politically. And yet the army keeps on doing his bidding, and their bidding. Which is testimony to what Dana was speaking about before. How deep running that automatic obedience is, even when there’s criticism. And how much warfare is identified with as security. It’s a complex answer, it isn’t yes or no, more yes, but no ..

New Profile years ago called for an arms embargo, or at least suspension of arms sales, and Gun Free Kitchen Tables definitely works for that. We think you know that the guns that are flooding into the country are making a lot of profit for some companies, and some people, and the arms industry altogether, as I’m sure you know, is very heavily invested in this conflict and making a huge profit from it. Many of the arms are sold very fast after they are used by Israel as ‘battle tested’ on Palestinians. And that gives it more selling appeal. So this is a terrible cycle of the arms industry feeding genocide.

**Sheila Triggs (UK):** Thank you so much for this insightful and in-depth analysis. I wanted to ask: with that mind-set of protecting Israel, what happens when young Israelis go to Gaza and they are confronted by families, children and everything that we see on our screens all the time. How can they carry on feeling that these are non-people? And what happens when they come back?

**Almudena Izquierdo (Spain)**: 20 years ago we were collaborating with New Profile campaigns to demilitarise society and support conscientious objectors, and they were very repressed by the government at that time. I wanted to ask, is this still the case?

**Dana Yair:** I think people are making a separationbetween the government andthe army – these are not two separate things. The army is above everything. People will go to the army no matter who is in charge. Most of the young people just want to be heroes, and to protect.Talking with Israeli society is not easy to do. We work with teachers and give lectures to people who are asking questions. To go to the mainstream, it’s almost impossible, to tell the truth. A friend of mine told me that she is unhappy that the army comes with guns to talk to her children’s kindergarten, but she doesn’t know how to challenge it – that’s who we can work with to talk about how it is affecting our lives.

I would say that a lot of people come back from the army with many difficulties and trauma. Suicides are common, but they are brainwashed to see Palestinians as always coming to kill them, the enemy. But I would also say that they go through brainwashing when they go into the army. I was asked by a Palestinian in a group I was talking to the other day, and the question has stayed with me: ‘When I go through a checkpoint, and have to show my ID, why am I treated so disrespectfully, and made to feel ashamed of who I am?’ I think my heart was broken to have to say that they were brainwashed to see all Palestinians as the enemy, as not human.

**Rela Mazali (Israel):** Can I just add that the military prisons are full of Reservists who didn’t want to go back to Gaza or the West Bank (all Israelis have to serve several weeks a year after compulsory Military Service, which lasts for 3 years for boys and 2 years for girls, from 18 years of age). After that, all those who have served in the army are called up each year as Reservists for a number of weeks. The statistics on Draft Resistance are not documented, in order not to endanger people.

**Ana Valdes (Uruguay)**: I went to a big resistance against military service by Gush Shalom years ago, does it still exist?

**Rela Mazali (Israel):** Gush Shalom and Bat Shalom shut down years ago, and the Jerusalem Link, partly because the Separation Wall made it much, much harder for many reasons to work across the lines now. And the failure of the Oslo Accords – they came to be seen as a kind of a con, a lie, a façade that enabled deeper Occupation. There are other organisations that are active now.

In general, the Military is sexist, in Israel as elsewhere women are less valued. Young Israeli women stationed on the borders prior to October 7, scouts, reported a lot of activity that seemed like a build-up of something but were dismissed and ignored because they were women. This reflects the general attitude to women within the military. Women are also more easily exempted from military service – although that may be changing now because there are not enough conscripts.

Miri Weingarten joined WiB vigils in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv during the second Intifada, from 2000 to 2003. A human rights activist, she has campaigned for the health rights of Palestinians under Occupation with Physicians for Human Rights-Israel for over 10 years before moving to Germany and then the UK. In London she has initiated a new WiB vigil as a response to the events on and since 7.10.23. Miri has continued to work for coalitions of Palestinian and Israeli human rights groups, representing them in the EU and the UN until 2015, when she began working as a public law solicitor in the UK, acting for refugees and for victims of the Grenfell Tower Fire. She currently runs a small grant-making foundation called Disrupt.

**Miri Weingarten:** After October 7 there was a huge shock response, and I felt a strong need to come together with others and think and mourn. That made me remember the WiB vigils, and I spoke to Pragna Patel, a founder of Southall Black Sisters, and we decided to set up a new weekly vigil in Euston Rd, London that was specifically about Gaza. At the time we didn’t even realise that there had been a WiB vigil in London at the statue of Edith Cavell for more than 30 years. In the event, a lot of the women who came to the new vigil were either Jewish, or ex-Israeli, from all walks of anti-militarist and feminist activism. There are big marches for Palestine, there is picketing, there is Boycott. British Society is very much ‘on-side’, even if the government and media aren’t. There was a feeling, I think, among Jewish and Israeli activists that this was a place where they felt comfortable, some have told me that this was a space where they could feel at home recognising the context of genocide and apartheid. So our original text, which probably needs updating, was about mourn the dead, save the living, stop the killing, then end the Occupation and apartheid. It was a recognition of the humanity of all those who have lost their lives, and are still losing their lives, within the political context of Occupation and apartheid. Many of the participants of our vigil on Saturdays go on to the big pro-Palestine marches afterwards. Others don’t feel comfortable with that, or can’t walk far as they are on crutches or in wheelchairs, and feel most comfortable being able to stand together in public in this way. There is much more sympathy on the street than there would have been, say, in Jerusalem. And there’s a good thing about that, but there’s a question about what we are doing then. We are witnessing silently, but what can be done?

To go back to the title of this session, *What is the Activism to Stop the War on Gaza?* Is that something that’s possible? I know people are doing the very best that they can, whether it’s legal, whether it’s citizen civil disobedience and boycotts, but there is a horrible sense that this may not end soon. That’s what leads me to think, when I think about the future, what can be the further future? What will be after, and can be picked up after? And as a political activist who analyses Israel Palestine, to move from someone who believed in two states, to an analysis of the situation as something more like apartheid. Then my dream and my hope was that afterwards there would be a state in which all citizens were equal. I now find myself looking again, and thinking – if this is genocide, what happens in a post-genocide society? A post-apartheid society, we have examples from South Africa, of the possibility of equality. In a post-genocide society, I don’t know what would happen to those seven million Israeli Jews, seven million Palestinians who live between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean sea, how can they live alongside each other after this irreversible moment? I know that is a question, not an answer, but I’m very grateful there are so many experienced activists from all over the world in this room and would love to hear from people their thoughts about their own activism, and their own perspectives for the future.

**Francesca Klug (UK)**: I just want to say as someone who has been attending the vigils many times, and now, unbelievably it’s almost a year, thank you so much to Miri for establishing the new vigils, and the wonderful way in which they are conducted. I’m not sure if you mentioned that one of the advantages of the vigil over the demo is that people do stop, and sometimes shout, but usually – you know - do take a leaflet, talk a little, and we have cars and buses tooting support. So it’s slightly more interactive because its smaller and on the pavement where people pass by. But I just wanted to say for myself and for many other Jewish people on the left, without having links to Israel, how much we are held to account all the time by friends and colleagues for what is happening in Israel. I have found the vigils provide a welcoming space, and from my perspective it’s not that there’s a different dialogue going on in the wider movement that has allowed more people to feel comfortable with big marches. Speaking personally, I don’t think anything’s changed, but many of us have gone on the big marches because its so horrendous. What is happening in Israel? Unspeakable. We feel the need to protest what the Israeli State is doing to the people of Gaza and the West Bank, but to me the space created by Women in Black on these vigils is distinct from the big marches, in spite of the fact there’s a Jewish Block. There doesn’t need to be a Jewish Block on the Women in Black marches and vigils, I feel totally at home, and comfortable and safe and able to express my opinions – just a reflection to share.

**Yolanda Rouiller (Spain):** There are also more than seven million Palestinian refugees who were displaced in 1948 and 1967, and of course we cannot imagine the future without them having the right to return.

**Liz Khan (UK)**: I’m from both London groups. I’ve been part of the group that meets at Edith Cavell for many years, and since you started at Euston I’ve been coming there too when I can. And I was thinking about why – the Wednesday group have always looked at Israel Palestine issues once a month, but I think with the invasion of Gaza it has been so important that there is a space to come to every week, so I thank you Miri for getting that off the ground.

**Pamela (UK):** I don’t live in London, but when I visit I come to vigils and marches. My background is that I grew up in apartheid South Africa, and so much of what has been said about the militarisation of society was similar, when all the white boys went into the army, and in what was then Rhodesia there was a similar kind of pride and an absolute sense that they couldn’t not go into the army. A lot of activism did contribute eventually to change, but there was a lot of international pressure too. Going on vigils and marches is the one thing that expresses how devastating I find it all, but I can’t feel much hope.

**Miri Weingarten:** Thank you. It is hard to feel hope – but I suppose that action is what makes hope, to some extent? I just want to say thank you so much to Rela and to Dana for making such thoughtful contributions, and at such short notice. And thank you to all of you – I hope that next time we meet, it will be in a different context.

**Session 15: Is Western pacifism colonialist? 7.9.2024**

**Interactive session facilitated by Eva Aneiros and Madrid Mujeres de Negro**

Our pacifism is crossed by the rest of our life circumstances, also by our privileges. We would like to propose a debate on several questions that will allow us to analyse our way of being pacifist, each one from where she is, in order to be able to build bridges with women in other situations and with other experiences in conditions of equality and mutual respect. To this end, we want to generate a debate around the following questions:

* Is pacifism different in war zones than in situations of peace?
* From where do we make criticisms of wars?
* Can we think of examples of pacifist colonialism (or colonialist pacifism)?
* What defence strategies can we propose?

**Introduction**

We believe that the International Network of Women in Black against War can help us discover new perspectives. This is one of the strengths of our network. There are groups of feminist and antimilitarist women like us, but with other ways of working, other sensitivities, other capacities, etc.

As a group and as an international network, we would like to improve our deconstruction of our privileges. This topic is especially important in groups from Western countries. It is difficult to realize one's own privileges without the help of other perspectives. We hope that interaction with women from other places will contribute to this collective work. That is why an international meeting of Women in Black seems like a good opportunity for us. From our pacifist and feminist position, we want to learn to recognize colonialist attitudes and to invent strategies that will distance us from colonialism.

We are not experts. The aim of this workshop is simply to open a space to share personal or group thoughts around the four questions we sent in the summary. Some of the criticisms we have received in recent years have come from women in places whose territory is at risk or has been attacked/invaded. That is why we have raised some specific questions along those lines. We can spend about 10-12 minutes on each question to finish this dynamic in an hour and leave the final half hour for open debate.

Words you identify with colonialism: we asked each woman to come up with a word or short idea that relates to colonialism. Responses:

* Domination, Dominance
* Violence
* Exploitation
* Patriarchy
* Masculinity
* White British oppression
* Power
* Superiority
* Contempt
* Slavery
* Inequality
* Dispossession
* Oppression
* White Dominance
* Take-over
* Subjugation
* Supremacy
* Disrepect
* Dehumanisation
* Capitalism
* Invisibilise
* Hierarchy

****

**Is pacifism different in war zones than in situations of peace?**

This question arose because we find it understandable that there are people who ask for weapons when their country is being invaded. We strongly support nonviolent alternatives, but in these extreme situations, can we judge actions in self-defense in the event of armed conflict?

On the other hand, when we do not distribute other people's texts because we do not fully agree with them, are we fully respectingthese women? Should we distribute their texts expressing our reservations?

**Some contributions to the discussion:**

* We prefer to focus on building bridges between civil organizations and denouncing the arms trade in our country.
* Examples of women from belligerent countries who also did not want to judge how the attacked countries defend themselves:
	+ WiB Belgrade denounced the Serbian army's aggression, but did not comment on the armed defense used by other Yugoslav republics in response
	+ The Feminist Antiwar Resistance (FAR, from Russia) do not criticize the sale of arms to Ukraine or Ukraine's own armed response.

**From where do we make criticisms of wars?**

We have many examples of opposition to wars throughout history and in all cultures, both in aggressor and attacked countries. From a pacifist perspective, what responses would we give to a war? - Do we believe the causes that are alleged are the origin of the war?

* When the causes involve us, how do we react?
* Prevent your country from attacking another?
* When your country is at war, abstain from participating in that war, disobey, and protest against it?
* Can war be a solution to problems or conflicts?
* How can we avoid stigmatizing or dehumanizing other people?
* How can we approach supposedly enemy people?

**How to manage contradictions:**

* Can we demand pacifism from communities that may be displaced or annihilated?
* How to respond to aggression?
* Should we help the victim to defend themselves from the attacker? From where do we stand in the face of aggression?

**Some contributions to the discussion:**

* Example of causes that involve us: the other day our comrades from the Congo said that our consumption of mobile phones and electric cars is fueling violence in Africa.
* Hoarding spaces, speaking before listening.
* Assuming that our context is that of everyone, forgetting to contextualise.
* Overloading them with work instead of supporting their initiatives (example: implementing cooperation projects that they have not designed or asked for)
* Ignoring the suffering that our lifestyle causes in other places (again the example of mobile phones and electric cars with metals extracted from Congo).

**What defense strategies can we propose?**

* Although each of our groups lives in a different context, and we are clear that we do not want to give lessons or tutor anyone, we do think it is important to be able to rely on the experience of other groups.

**From where do we make criticisms of wars?**

We have many examples of opposition to wars throughout history and in all cultures, both in aggressor and attacked countries. From a pacifist perspective, what responses would we give to a war? - Do we believe the causes that are alleged are the origin of the war?

* When the causes involve us, how do we react?
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* How can we approach supposedly enemy people?

**How to manage contradictions**:

* Can we demand pacifism from communities that may be displaced or annihilated?
* How to respond to aggression?
* Should we help the victim to defend themselves from the attacker? From where do we stand in the face of aggression?

**Can we think of examples of pacifist colonialism (or colonialist pacifism)?**

In order to question our ideas, it is important that we are able to detect those attitudes that are mediated by our privileges from some places, and that from other places we feel free to show our colleagues those ways of working that we consider may reflect a certain superiority or colonialist attitudes. The objective is not to reproach each other, but to be able to work on a level of equality where we all feel respected and listened to.

**Some contributions to the discussion:**

* Ignoring examples and knowledge from certain places (Africa is one of them). Believing that Europe is the centre of the world.
* Distrusting the paths chosen by disseminating different proposals for defense strategies in conflict zones that do not involve the use of weapons.

In the face of nonviolent resistance strategies, there is usually brutal repression and we are aware that pacifism receives a lot of criticism, from all sides, but it is important to imagine other proposals, in addition to humanitarian aid.

**Some contributions to the discussion:**

* When war breaks out, in the midst of violence, pacifists are asked for answers, but there is not much we can do at thattime. Most of our requests are made before that and they do not listen to us.
* Women from Central Africa, the Great Lakes Region, the Sahel and the Horn of Africa told us “our resistance is our survival”
* Does this mean that one of our priority objectives should be to keep women's networks and groups alive?

**Session 16: WiB Website**

**Facilitators: Siȃn Jones and Nina Nissen**

**Siȃn Jones (Spain, ex London):** First of all, I’ll introduce Lieve, who is probably known to a lot of you and is the moderator of the Women in Black email list.

**Lieve Snellings (Belgium):** Hi everybody, I’m glad to be here to say a word about the international Women in Black mailing list. But first I have to say I am doing the WiB email list in the English language (760). There is also a list in Spanish, that Yolanda Rouiller manages (over 200), and an Italian list (about 50 women). There used to be a French list, but I’m not sure about who manages that now. I’m going to talk about the English list, because I don’t know so much about the other lists. I started to do this since the conference in Marina di Massa in 2003. At that moment Yolanda had an extended email list and I had built up one on my side, and we put those lists together there. Quickly after that those lists grew and grew, and the problems grew in the sense that we sent out a lot of emails every day, maybe 5, 10, and women reacted that they were overloaded with all the information, that it was too much. And because it was such an overload they didn’t look at it any more, also spam came in, and viruses. My computer, for instance, was totally blocked twice. So, we agreed that this list would be for feminist anti-war peace actions and exchanges about what all of our groups were doing only. And I combined reactions, for example, into one email with headings; at that time computers did not have so many possibilities. I want to say that we now also have an interactive list, the lesbian list, but that works fine because we are such a small group.

For security reasons, we wanted to know everyone who is on the list, or at least have some connection, so I would write to them to ask: what is your full name, where are you from, are you in a Woman in Black group or are you active in another related group, if so which one – and how do you know about the mailing list? If I didn’t get a reply after my first email, I wrote a second time to say that I didn’t get an answer so please reply. If I didn’t get an answer to that, I wrote a third time and if I didn’t get a reply, I deleted the request. I have quite often done that.

**Heena Thompson (UK):** Lieve, do you need any help with this?

**Llieve Snellings (Belgium):** The list is a little slower at the moment, so it’s OK.

**Siȃn Jones (Spain, ex London):** Thank you, Lieve, for what you do, and connecting us. I know that I found that list very useful, and we have communicated a great deal about who needs to be on the list this year.

Just to outline the aims of this workshop: Why does WiB need a new website? We’re starting with the background to why I think a new website is needed, and hopefully a few other people do too. And in this workshop we’re going to look for input from you, to gather your suggestions, your thoughts about the current and the idea of a new website. And hopefully we will be able to plan the way forward to a new website. I’m going to do an outline of the current website for those who haven’t seen it, or just to point out some of the difficulties and problems, and then we’ll have a general open discussion with your immediate reactions. Then what we’d like to do is to take a series of questions about the use of the new website:

**audience** - who is the website for? Everyone interested in the WiB network, the general public, feminists, anti-militarist and peace networks?

**content -** we need to update the content. What do we want the website to say? What WiB are doing, a record of WiB activities; a tool to enable new WiB vigils to grow; with links to other WiB websites and feminist peace organisations like WILPF? How do we want to project our image?

**use -** does the current website work for you? how can it be improved? for example, navigation? adding content?

**management -** what’s the best way to manage the site? At the moment, it’s just me, and I really don’t think that’s ideal. I am hoping that other women will come forward and we can find a way of making the site more interactive and having more participation. Tasks - adding and updating content, correcting errors, updating and maintaining software. Different countries to take on responsibility for their own sections?

**funding -** the even more tricky question of how do we fund the website update? how do we fund ongoing maintenance?

Throughout this process, Nina and I will be alternatively facilitating and taking notes so that by the time we get towards the end of the session we should have noted most of the things that you have said, which means we can then summarise the ideas and hopefully look at some very clear next steps of how we move forward.

I’d like to start with a big thankyou to Cynthia Cockburn for the idea of the website, for many ideas, and Ana Valdes who was instrumental in the construction of the current website. In 2013, Cynthia started work with Ana from Uruguay, Nadia Farou from Seville and other women. You may say, why do we need to change it? Well, it’s pretty clunky, it’s not very flexible, it relies on one person to input information. It needs to be more of a collaborative venture. We have had various criticisms over the years from various people but somehow the moment has never arrived to have a plan to move forward, so that we can not only make it more collaborative but increase our visibility. We can increase the number of visitors to our site, and we can provide more information, maybe in a slightly different form. The current site isn’t nimble enough to keep up with ongoing events; it needs to be interactive and accessible to more women; it needs new energy and creativity to reflect who we are; new contributors, new administrators …. and new funding.

Just to let you know that we currently have 2-5000 visitors to the WiB website each month, however probably up to 500 of those are bots which I understand are a sort of things that crawl around your site [*shows tour of site on screen*]. Over the last year there has been a really substantial increase in vigils recorded on the site, particularly in the United States and also in Europe, in response to the war on Gaza. I would say that there has been about a 30% increase in either new vigils, or vigils that used to meet and have revived themselves.

When Sue was finishing the Women in Black book we tried to track down as many vigils as we could, but we’ve still been surprised to see how many vigils have reconstituted themselves because of the war on Gaza. You can see we have got vigils around the world: in Africa we only have South Africa; in South America we have Argentina, Colombia and Uruguay; in Asia we have India; in the Middle East we have Israel; and in Oceana we have Australia which has seen two vigils reconstitute themselves and another one that has been going since 2002. In Europe we have about 29 separate vigils, if the statistics are correct, in some countries just one, but in Denmark there are vigils in Copenhagen, Arhus, Skanderborg and Skive. One of those is new. There are three vigils in Germany, and one of the things that we have been trying to do is to include information in the language that people in Germany, for example, are going to use to read to see what’s there on the site. In some cases, it’s in English, in some cases in two languages, to make it more accessible. This is probably the most used part of the site, and we have been adding a large number of vigils over the past months. Most vigils put information that includes a contact person, usually that’s an email address, but most Women in Black have their own methods of contacting people about vigils, so there may be a link to a Facebook page, to Instagram or X or Twitter or other social media sites. It’s a way of easily finding if there’s a vigil somewhere near you.

One of the problematic areas is that when the site was designed it gave people the facility to put their own information onto the website, and some groups like WiB Madrid and London continue to post weekly photos of vigils and information about events, and links to the leaflets given out to the public. So that is very flexible, but it’s not easy to use and sadly over the years the number of people being able to use that site blog facility has become smaller and smaller. And there are lots of people on this list where either it’s quite static, or out of date. So that’s one of the things we want to look at, whether people can update their own information onto the main site. I think that one of the other problems with the site is that for example, I was putting on information from women from Armenia, and the text of the online meeting that was organised by Armenian women, but this part of the site was attacked so many times, and we received so much spam and so many attempts to take it down - particularly during the two periods of war - that it was almost impossible to keep it up. So, we need to have better protections so that we can put up sites that are not going to be attacked and taken down by external sources. I’ll stop there so Nina can ask if you have questions or contributions.

**Nina Nissen (Germany):** I think it would be really useful to hear from those of you who have had a chance to look at the website, how it’s working for you, what you think needs to be done to improve it. Maybe the navigation needs changing? Or added content? Font sizes? Whatever you think would be useful in terms of easing the use of the website, and how you think it can be improved.

**Charlotte:** Mine’s just a slight comment. I looked at it this morning from the angle of somebody who hadn’t seen it, and on the Women in Black vigils, and About Women in Black, for me the power is Women in Black bearing witness, and it is women, in the same way Greenham was women, and it was powerful because of that. And there’s just one word, it says that these vigils are generally women only. I think if someone didn’t know about it, they could take that as ‘oh, yeah, men can come along as well, generally it’s just for women, but it’s for all of us’. Therefore, to me, it dilutes the power, even though I know that you need everybody to work for peace. That was all, it was just the word ‘generally’.

**Liz Khan (London):** We are a women only vigil that meets at the statue of Edith Cavell in London, and if men come we ask them to respect our space. But at the other London vigil in Euston, two or three men tend to join, and they tend to be partners of the women there. So, it’s just about respecting each other, and I know in Jerusalem, when I’ve stood in vigils there, there have been men. And in India, when I was with them, there were men. I think each group has to make their decision, if they’re going to be a women-only space. Thank you.

**Lieve Snellings (Belgium):** I just wanted to say, you show many of the new vigils and I wanted to say that Leuven, for example, started in the 1990s, and many of us have tried to update this information but it was technically not possible. But I find it a good suggestion to make a link, for example to our Facebook page, and that could maybe solve the problem we had. Thank you.

**Sue Finch (UK):** Could I just add to that, Vita has put in the chat, could we have directions about how to send things to the website? And she adds could we please correct the email for Mujeres de Negro Castello y Valencia

**Siȃn Jones (Spain, ex London):** Yes, on the first/front page, and on the Take Action: Start a Vigil page there is an address that I currently manage, which is wibinfo@gn.apc.org and I would love people to send me that information. For Valencia, just send me the email and I’ll do it.

**Mavi Vega (Madrid):** Hi, I wanted to comment about the web page. We have a blog, the one you show on the international website, and we also had a website, but this has stopped working, it hasn’t been updated for a long time. So we are going to open a new website, with a nodo 50 special domain. At the moment we are working on this, we are building it, and we would like to link both websites, to have a connection between them. We would like to know if the international WiB website can give us some space to include all the data that we want to share? We will give you more information and update the pictures we have. Thank you.

**Irmgard Busemann (Germany):** We are very slow at changing our blog, it’s very old information on the WiB website. If we can change this to put a link to our blog instead, it would be much better. We need this in German, then the blog will work here, for our group.

**Siȃn Jones:** If anyone wants to change anything on the website, they need to send the information to the WiB info address: wibinfo@gn.apc.org, and that is me, and we can change it. If you can send it in German and English, or just German, I will put it up.

**Nina Nissen (Germany):** Irmgard, if you send me the blog in German before you send it to Sian, then we can sort out the translation between us, you have got my email address.

Nina then introduced two minutes discussion/reflection on each of the questions above (website audience, content, use, management, funding) and gathered ideas, suggestions and thoughts about the website and the way forward. Responses included:

 **Audience: Who is the website for?**

* Women in Black groups to feel connected globally, and with other feminist groups too.
* For whoever is interested in Women in Black, feminism, peace, women against wars, women against violence
* WiB London hands out a leaflet with a QR code that links to the website to answer the question: Who are Women in Black? Otherwise, how do you spread the word?
* A recruitment tool for Women in Black

**Content:**

* A historic archive to research old statements, or link to local archives
* A place of reference for ourselves where we can see who we are, where we are, with the vocation of making ourselves visible to people who do not know us
* Photos and leaflets, links to WiB websites and blogs
* Information about women against wars and women against violence – the wars against women, the Courts of Women, the evidence of beatings, battering, rape
* Can we maybe add the Women in Black book? Or if not, just the introduction?

**Siȃn Jones:** If you want to see something on the website, then send it! If you don’t know, please ask. Can I just respond about letting more people know about WiB? I’ve had a short conversation with someone who knows about websites, and what’s missing on our original website is something called metadata, which I don’t really understand, but basically you can put stuff into websites that ensures that its more exposed, that it turns up in more listings. The content can be focused towards different audiences. And this is something I want to explore further, and hopefully understand, because there are ways of ensuring that the site is easier to find – quite often if you look for Women in Black you end up with a lot of things about the identity of black women, or a play that was on in London called The Woman in Black, and at one stage that was all you could find. So we need to do some tweaking in the background that no-one will see, but the site will actually respond to queries online a little better.

**Use: How can the site be improved?**

* Needs to be clearer how to send information to site
* Need to know what can be put up
* Links to local vigils and blogs and websites
* Add entries in different languages/automatic translation

**Management: (putting things up, agreeing what it looks like)**

* Suggestion: a clear proposal about what’s needed to go out to all WiB groups
* Someone from each of the different countries in the network to volunteer support
* Needs to be collaborative, not feminist to carry on being down to just one person
* Women to think about what contribution they could make

**Funding:**

* Invite as many Women in Black as possible to make a monthly donation into the WiB website account – could be as little as 5 euros? £5?
* Website update will cost between £3-5000 so some other fund-raising will also have to be done
* A ‘donate’ button on the website?

**Next steps – Action points**

* Siȃn will ask Lieve to put something out on the list to let them know if anyone is aware of any sources of funding for women and technology
* Liz will send out details of the international website Bank Account to Nina and Sian for any groups or individuals who want to make a monthly contribution, so they can discuss if it can be made public
* Volunteers offered to take this further, set up a ‘website working group’, identify possible funders, and develop a brief for funding, within a three month deadline

**Siȃn Jones**: It has been really encouraging for so many people to come to this workshop, and for so many women to contribute. And I will emphasise again, if you have other thoughts, or you want to get in touch with me about the existing website or about the new website, wibinfo@gn.apc.org is the place to do it. And if you want to send photos of your vigils where there are no photos, I’m happy to put them up as well.

We seem to be getting more videos as the situation in Palestine, and in Israel and the West Bank gets worse. Women in Black was set up because of what was happening in Palestine and Israel, and for many groups who remained dormant over several years there has been an amazing revitalisation and I would like to build a site that reflects the energy and the commitment, and what women are doing for peace, whether it is a war or, as Corinne said, whether it is the issue of violence against women. So, I’d like to thank you all for the contributions that you have made, and Nina particularly for trying to keep me under control!

<https://womeninblack.org/> is available on PC/laptop and mobile phone

**Yolanda Rouiller (Spain):** Rebecca and Lieve were asking about the Spanish list. More than 200 people are on this list, which was created in 2000, when NATO was bombing Serbia. At the beginning, it was me who was running the list in Spanish and English, but after a few years Lieve took over the English list because it was too much for me. And we created a website at that time, but this has disappeared. There is also a lista nodo 50 in Italian, managed by the Italians. We created a new French list after Edith Rubenstein passed away, but there are very few women on the list, or writing on it, it’s really a dead list. So we have four lists, and we pay annually - at the moment it is me who is paying for the four lists. As Mavi said, we are creating a new website, we are inviting all the groups who speak Spanish, we shall make it open to all. Trisha Novak from the US has been doing the translations into English for almost 20 years, and she is doing a wonderful job. For the translations into Spanish, Eva and Yolanda do them, but we would like to have more people to translate from English. It would be nice to have a group of translators because we cannot translate everything that comes from the English list, its too much work, but it would be lovely to have more people joining as we can only do what it most important. Thank you so much for giving me this space to speak.

**Nina Nissen (Germany):** I just wanted to echo Siȃn to say that it’s really lovely that so many women were part of this workshop, and I think we’ve made a good start in gathering information, gathering your ideas, that would have been very difficult to bring together by email or any other format. And I think it’s great to have some kind of plan of how to move forward. So, thank you everybody, it’s been really, really useful, thank you.

**Session 17: Colombia – Women’s role in the peace process and the Women in Black conference in Colombia next year 8.9.2024**

**Speakers: Marina Gallego Zapata, National Coordinator of Ruta Pacifica de las Mujeres and Mujeres de Negro and Clara Ines Mazo Lopez, Ruta Pacifica and MdN**

**Marina Gallego (Colombia)**: I am the Coordinator of Ruta Pacifica in Colombia, **Clara Mazo** is also here with me as well. I would like to say thank you to WiB for inviting me, it’s very important for this movement to continue. WiB started 33 years ago, I’d like to congratulate WiB for this wonderful meeting, the sessions have been amazing. Changing the world to be more pacifist is what we’re all working towards.

Ruta Pacifica started in 1996, in 9 regions of the country, and 142 smaller towns, and has been part of Women in Black since 2000. There are now just over 350 groups across the country, including rural, urban, Black, indigenous, lesbians, women with disabilities, young and old women. We have organised a national mobilisation of women. There were huge displacements of women because of the armed conflict. The armed conflict in Colombia is the oldest conflict in Latin America – it has been going on for 60 years! In the 1960s insurgent guerrilla groups were formed – the FARC is the largest, most significant group. The negotiation process with FARC started in 2016. There are still guerrilla groups, including the National Liberation Army (ELN), and the government is trying to negotiate with them. There are also para-military groups, and today the government is trying to put an end to the violence with FARC, and the neo-paramilitaries, and other high-impact criminal groups as well. We have been in negotiations for about 9 months now. So you can see there has been a very, very long conflict which has affected generations.

Women have had a big impact on the peace negotiations, we have been pressuring them, we have been lobbying for them. In the 27 years that Ruta Pacifica has been up and running we have organised national demonstrations with more than 30,000 women participating, we have held more than 900 WiB sit-ins of 30-40 women, and this has been a constant dynamic. We act in different regions every month, from 2000 when we joined WiB to 2024, we dress in black and carry out our vigils.

Wars are extremely patriarchal. They are incredibly destructive, and they destroy not just our bodies, but our identities and culture, which is why we have always said that the armed conflict needs to be solved with dialogue. We have come up with a number of specific proposals to put an end to the war, and different ways of moving forward to the demilitarisation of the territories, bilateral ceasefires, humanitarian agreements, and exchange proposals as well. For many years, different politicians have been kidnapped, key political figures, more than 50 people including military figures, and this happened for 7, 8, 9, 10 years, quite terrifying really.

Then we had the right-wing government led by Uribe, and his actions had a lot of consequences in terms of increased militarism. We had 6402 so-called ‘false positives’ but actually they were extra-judicial killings. And that’s a very serious violation of human rights, and a number of these have gone to trial now. So we’ve had a number of serious conversations with the ELN, and with the guerrilla groups, to propose different dialogues etc.

We’ve also participated in the development of a social agenda for women, and are working with women victims, and the consequences of the war on the lives of women in particular, in private and public spaces, at national and regional level. Ruta Pacifica has also done quite a lot of theoretical work on violence against women, and war, so it has helped to lighten some of the very serious consequences of this war, or at least shine a light on them. These consequences reach incalculable levels, including historical discrimination, subordination, and inequality. This is why we say that war is profoundly patriarchal, because women have lost the possibility to have even an agenda of rights.

We have been nurtured and have found different ways to survive in different areas, with lots of mobilisations drawing on international feminism and international solidarity as well, where we find the greater the militarisation in conflicts, the greater the violence against women. So we see very clearly the need to demilitarise our lives. A number of the actions that we have carried out have been specific, pacifist resistance in our different areas, and we have denounced the atrocities carried out by different groups, the rebel groups and the paramilitary groups.

After these violent events, women celebrate life and do everything we can to make sure that communities can stay on their land, specifically indigenous groups and Black women have been mobilising to ask for humanitarian corridors and safe passage. We have also been working on the construction of Truth and Memory, to keep the memory of all the people who have been disappeared or been killed or displaced, alive. Listening to other women, so that these women don’t fall into oblivion, and are forgotten - the women who have been victims of the armed conflict.

We also have agreements to respect communities by the armed groups. Women have always been mediators in their communities to make sure their communities are respected, and their lives. We accompany women who have been victims of the armed conflict, providing psycho-social advice, help and support, legal support as well, and any actions that support resistance and strengthen the social fabric of women, which has been more or less destroyed by the armed conflict. So women have also embarked on agricultural, and livestock projects, where they have been destroyed by the armed conflict, and struggled against the multinational companies which are taking over territories. We have managed to generate spaces and protect victims through lobbying and by mobilisations as well.

Women have organised to rescue women and children from the armed group camps. Another thing that we have done is to rise up to take political action against the war, so women have organised to prevent war and build peace. Teachers in their schools also organise educational activities, trying to convince young people not to go to war, and creating opposition to war through different symbolic and artistic expressions. We call this artivism – art + activism! These are mobilisations that we do continuously to generate knowledge and have this symbolic resistance to war as well.

We have also participated in the negotiations with FARC and were particularly active in those areas of the negotiations that affected women. We said that we wanted to be the makers of the pact, not the subjects of the pact, so we insisted that we be there, in the negotiations, to make sure that any agenda that was established included women, and all the rights of women in the different areas, and points that were agreed on. We carry out active participation in order to bring about peace with justice through the peace agreement, and all the peace-building work, and are also very active in making sure that the peace agreement is enforced. We have had over 130 different actions for justice and peace and developed a symbolic language using colours and materials through imaginative street theatre and mime.

**Q+A**

**Q** Do you have any funding from the Colombian government?

**A** No – we have funding from international donors, but none from the Colombian government. The women activists volunteer. We are trying to get funding for social organisations included in the peace negotiations, but this is only a proposal as yet. With the new government that has been two years in power, there have been some promises of changes, and support for social organisations. But there is a lot of bureaucracy and many laws against corruption, so there is not yet any data to show how much money has been given to social organisations.

**Marina Gallego (Colombia)**: Continuing my presentation about how we have been involved in the negotiations between the government and FARC: Back in 2005 when they started, we were amazed at the impunity and the crimes against women. There was a Justice and Peace Tribunal but women and peace and justice organisations could not participate. Women wanted to know about their relatives, many of whom had died or disappeared. So Ruta started a research process with about 300 women who had been victims of paramilitary groups throughout Colombia. This showed that many women had been victims of the paramilitaries, then were also victims of the Justice and Peace court because the paramilitary men said that the women deserved all the violence that happened to them because they were with the guerrillas. The victimisation of women was not recognised. After this, Ruta decided that a Truth Commission for women was needed so that all the victimisation of women could be known in the country. So Ruta created the Truth Commission and interviewed women throughout Colombia, in 80 towns and cities. It was a participatory research process, using methodologies developed by Ruta Pacifica that included feminist theories and practice. After all this process of research, there is a book with a chapter that describes all these events, and the impact that they had on 1000 women, and also the strategies that they had to survive in the midst of the violence. It details 9 collective cases, the reparations that women are asking for, and the incredible coping mechanisms of women. Ruta used this evidence to show what a future peace process should include, and one of the main demands was that women wanted to be part of the peace process and recognised as peace-builders. Women wanted to be involved in the different peace processes – at the peace table, in the drafting of the agreement, in verification, and in all these spaces as equals.

The demand was that women should be heard, and taken into account, and – the first thing – wanted their bodies and their lives to be respected. They told the government that women were needed in the peace process, and the work of the Truth Commission that Ruta had done convinced the Colombian government that women needed to be involved in the peace process. They were negotiating in Cuba, and Ruta decided to send the report at the same time as holding big public events in Colombia to put pressure on them to include women in the peace process. Three points had been agreed – one was about political participation, so we put pressure that women should be included in that. Another was about resolving the problem of cocaine trafficking, so Ruta said that women needed to be included in that. So we organised a big meeting on women and peace with 600 women, to build our own point of view on these points. The priorities were agrarian reform, the participation of women in political life, and alternative development to solve the drug trafficking issue, and these views were sent to the negotiation table. The negotiators then created the Gender Commission in response to Ruta’s pressure, and Ruta was invited to talk to them, along with other feminist organisations, and to build a feminist perspective into the agreements. We heard later that the government and FARC expected the women to say ‘oh no, what you have done is rubbish’ but we took the agreements that had already been made and looked at how they could be turned to include a gender perspective, not only women but also gay, lesbian etc. So this was a success, and we also managed to include a demand for a Truth Commission and a special Justice Tribunal, taking inspiration from the International Court of Justice. We got agreement that women should be included in these. Ruta and many other women’s groups took part in a public referendum to ask for peace, but this was lost. Ruta continued to campaign again. Many people opposed the idea of including a gender perspective in the agreement – there was fear about what gender meant, so many people voted against it.

When the final agreement was signed in November 2016 we achieved the inclusion of women's rights in the peace agenda, recorded in the Final Peace Agreement. The armed conflict has not ended, currently there are nine ongoing negotiation processes, so we are not in a post-conflict, but in a transitional situation. Our view is that we are just half way towards building long-lasting peace. The peace agreements need to become laws, and Ruta is trying to support this, although there is a lot of opposition, so that the agreement will be carried out. We see it as a success that we demanded that the current Peace and Justice tribunal would be half women and half men, and this has been agreed. One of the members – Alejandra – is part of Ruta Pacifica. We have transcribed over 3000 interviews with women who have been victims of the armed conflict for the Truth Commission, and this has been a very big help to the Commission. Ruta has brought cases of sexual violence during the armed conflict, with other women’s groups. We have also been helping a Special Unit to find disappeared relatives. We have been monitoring the implementation of the agreement on agrarian reform, in particular that women have access to land, and monitoring the agreements to make sure that they are implemented.

What is the way forward? We continue to support the nine negotiation processes and strengthen women’s groups, protect women, and help them to protect themselves. We keep memories alive, and also work with young women who are now part of Ruta. We are making links with climate change as this also has an impact on violence in the country, particularly on women. We aim to strengthen the political participation of women so that they become candidates for public office and become mayors, governors etc. There has been an increase in women candidates – not that they win yet.. We keep on mobilising in the streets – this is what we are doing to keep women involved in the peace processes, hoping that we will arrive at a state where there is no armed conflict.

Clara has been with Ruta in Medellin, Antioquia, since the beginning, and she can see some of the bigger elements of the organisation, especially Ruta’s work with other women’s organisations.

**Clara Mazo (Colombia):** This made it possible that everyone got together with a common goal, such as the peace negotiation process with FARC, or in the big meetings for peace, meaning that there is one proposal from the whole women’s movement in Colombia. Getting women’s groups together is a strength of the Ruta, and also the symbolic language of the Ruta, which I love. Ruta from the beginning managed to challenge political language, and now it is very interesting to see how other groups have copied – or taken inspiration from – the language of Ruta Pacifica, a language that is non-violent and a symbolic language that reaches all communities. When we work in the streeet, one of our languages is silence, with slogans of great strength.

La Ruta was born at the right time, at a moment when the armed conflict in Colombia was at a historical moment – the peak of paramilitary violence - 1996. Our message was that we needed to protest, in sisterhood. Many of the women who were part of Ruta Pacifica when we began had never been out of their houses or their cities, but through the language of the Ruta, they were able to understand that the problem was not only their problem, but that many other women were also affected by the violence. For example, the journalists who were interviewing women in these protests were amazed that women could give complex answers about the violence and the political problems. This is because of the sisterhood, that women were able to connect with each other, and feel connected, protected, and empowered.

**Marina Gallego (Colombia)**: Summarising 27 years of work is hard, but these are the key points. It was very important to become part of Women in Black, we were all wearing black, against war, and this created a strong impact across when you were able to see hundreds of women dressed in black in the streets, not totally in silence, but wearing black. This created a very rich impression across the country. We hope that the experience of Ruta is useful in conflicts across the world, even if their conflicts are very different as in Israel, Palestine and Ukraine, for example, and that we can learn from the experiences of women in other countries that are at war.

We also want to connect with women from Guatemala and Mexico who are in equally violent situations, mainly because of drug trafficking and criminal groups, where violence also has an impact on women’s lives in a similar way to the impact on women in Colombia. And with women in Africa, for example Somalia and other conflicts, and to learn from women who have been in post-conflict situations. This is something that we really need to think about, how to learn from other countries around the world.

We are working in the nine regions of Ruta across Colombia to develop the goals for the next Women in Black conference and have agreed to host it in Colombia. We are applying for funding from international donors and learning the lessons of the last conference we hosted before, trying to decide between holding it in Bogota again (as we did in 2011), or in another city - but this will make it more expensive for travelling. It will be in person (or perhaps a hybrid of online and in person). Hopefully we can share a draft plan with you in about a month. We will let you know the dates as soon as we can!

**Clara Mazo (Colombia)**: Being in this conference has been inspiring, and we will aim for continuity with some of the ideas raised and keep these in mind.

**Heena Thompson (UK)**: Thank you for all your work in Colombia, and the impact that you are having. I was sorry to miss the 2011 conference, but it was inspiring to see your work when we came to Colombia in 2010. There have been so many conflicts - some of them not recent - in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala, it will be interesting to draw on the experiences of some of the things that have come out of those conflicts, and some of the resistance. And some of the women’s non-violent actions during those conflicts, so thank you.

**Marina Gallego (Colombia)**: There are very important experiences in Guatemala and El Salvador about memory and truth, and we will try to include these in the conference. They have their own experiences of building a Truth Commission, as women’s groups, specifically on the impact of the war on women. And we keep on telling this story because this is a very rare, unique experience. The women in Guatemala, after 30 years or so, managed to bring justice to perpetrators of sexual violence, so we think this will be a key point. For the women in Guatemala, and in Mexico, there is also the issue of the disappeared resulting from drug trafficking. This is not an armed conflict, as categorised internationally, but the women there are working hard. So we will try to link all of these with the wars in Europe, or close to Europe, and everything that’s happening in Africa, like the conflict in Somalia, that is sort of forgotten in Colombia.

**Ana Valdes (Uruguay)**: How are you working to re-educate men? I was in Guatemala and El Salvador, working with a project to re-educate boys who once they returned to civil society, their only knowledge was weapons, so we had workshops to try and reintegrate them into civil life. Men as old as 25, the only thing they knew was to fight.

**Marina Gallego (Colombia)**: In Colombia, there is a process for laying down arms. Former combatants have different public programmes. A public agency has responsibility for helping ex combatants, male and female, to reintegrate into civilian life, but it is extremely difficult. La Ruta is not working directly in this area, we work with women, specifically victimised women, and peace-building women. We see that there is a continuum between violence against women in private life and in public life in armed conflict, violence in the home is exacerbated in public life, so our main intervention is with women. We have some feedback on the reintegration programmes, but they are not something we are working on directly.

**Clara Mazo (Colombia)**: One experience about men, about boys, in my region, Antioquia – a rural area that has been badly impacted by the armed conflict – is that activities with women have also included boys and girls. Boys and girls listen to what the women - including their mothers - say and hear how they are becoming empowered to participate in political life, and the children see that there are alternatives to armed conflict. For example, boys and girls can participate by making music in the street protests and taking part in theatre workshops.

**Kristen**: I just wanted to ask about the Commission on Women’s Experiences of War, I missed the correct reference, and which country it was from?

**Clara Mazo (Colombia)** : The Women’s Truth Commission in Colombia is recorded in a book that has all the information, and you can find this on the Ruta Pacifica website (English version: <https://rutapacifica.org.co/wp/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/165x235-Resumen-Colombia-ingles-FINAL-FEB6.pdf>). There is another Commission in Colombia, which is a public one, the National Truth Commission.

 **Plenary 8.9.2024**

**Sue Finch (UK)**: This conference has been such an extraordinary experience, we want to ask all of you for your thoughts and views about how it has been for you. We thought we would begin with our gang of four that started it – Liz, how has it been for you?

**Liz Khan (UK)**: Wow! These six days have been amazing. To listen to such diverse stories of women living through at times really horrendous conditions, in Palestine, Afghanistan, the refugee centre in Kakuma. Hearing about the women from the World Courts, and then moving on to thinking about how NATO affects us, and Finland has responded to the war on their doorstep. This conference has made me think about Madrid’s questions, of colonialism in relation to the exploitation of the Great Lakes region on the African continent as we are busy mining their minerals for our cars and phones.

I thought it was really important to hear from the Israeli women about how militarism affects their lives from the cradle to the grave, and I hope that Corinne’s amazing words for a more hopeful, caring and peaceful world would move us on. The workshop from Colombia really gives us hope about women insisting on being involved in negotiations for peace and insisting on sitting at the tables where those decisions are made. I can’t even pick a favourite. Each day has been so amazing, and it’s made me feel so proud of being part of this amazing crowd worldwide. It has been amazing.

**Heena Thompson (UK):** It has been an incredible conference, an incredible few days, and thank you to everybody who’s participated – thank you to you all. It has been so fantastic to link up with South Africa, the previous in-person conference, and with the next conference in Colombia, not forgetting that we also had a conference during the pandemic, and online, with Armenia. I think others will have lots to say, but thank you, it has been incredibly informative. I’ve got lots to think about, lots to read, and lots of really good connections, so thank you all.

**Rebecca Johnson (UK):** I want to completely endorse everything that Liz and Heena just said, and not repeat that, but it just has been so incredible, and every single session has been so informative, inspirational, important, passionate . . In some cases, heartbreaking, but also in many cases inspiring me to want to do more. I’m a very practical person, as many of you will know, and I always try to think, so how can we learn from this? And do more, and put things in place, and communicate – we’ve touched on all those things in today’s sessions. So let me start by saying the thought that came into my head listening to wonderful Marina and Clara from Colombia was that the last time they hosted a conference some of us had bought tickets in advance, then the date changed and we couldn’t get our money back, so we went anyway and spent some time with Ruta Pacifica. And I was thinking since lock-down, and understanding so much more about the very high costs for the climate of people flying in lots of places, I would like to ask our sisters in Ruta Pacifica and Women in Black Colombia to think about finding a way to plan in a hybrid part for your conference next year? For those of us who maybe cannot come in person for health reasons, climate reasons which I know we all feel very strongly about as well. It wouldn’t be quite like this, I think, but I do in my professional life attend conferences across the other side of the world where I can listen to the conference all day and at a certain point they put me on a screen to give my presentation, and to receive questions, and often there are several others like me who are attending in Japan or wherever, by screen. So we don’t quite have the fun of all being together, but we can still spend time on the time zone of the conference, so we have to be prepared to go with the time zone of you. I can find it easy for Colombia, because I myself am a very late-night person, as some of you know, so we would understand that we would need to be listening, if in in Europe, late at night for this. But we could listen. And also we could have speakers from countries that can’t come in person. So I would like to ask if that might be possible for you to consider as you go into your planning? I feel very excited about hearing that you were doing your planning, so that led me to think that, as your plans develop, we can also have a meeting like this with a lot of different women to hear from you about your planning in Colombia, and to feedback, and it could just be an hour and a half, like this was, we learnt so much already.

So that was one positive thing I felt, and I actually am prepared, if it was useful, to convene also as I now have an upgraded zoom system and it makes it easier to do some of this. I’ve learned to do some of this, it was hard at first, but now I feel I understand a bit better. But then I started thinking that in our network, as well, the lesbian Women in Black group was started by Lepa, as you know, started by invitation, and it meets once a month. Now maybe that would be a little too much, or maybe we don’t need to do it as a regular thing, but I would like us to think that everybody here and in your groups, when there is an issue that your group is working on, and you want to share it with the much wider WiB networks, then if you contacted me I would be very happy to work with you to find a date and to make this zoom facility available to those of you who don’t have the money or the upgrading, but equally, in many of your countries you will already have that. So that would be something that you would plan, and you’d invite us, and you’d be the host. But I can be the host, and as I’ve done for most of these sessions, hand it over to the facilitators on any issue at all, as long as we can agree a date, because I’m fascinated by all these issues.

I have two short, forward-looking suggestions. When Sian and Nina were talking about the Women in Black website and talked about maybe sending out their ideas for updating after hearing from lots of women, that they would think about November for this year. And again this is the sort of thing that I would be happy to facilitate a zoom meeting to take that work on the website forward collectively. I would like to offer that to Sian and Nina, and they would just be able to take us through, as they did in the earlier session. And to think about other issues that maybe we can do that with, and another one that sprang to my mind was that where there are session like with the Afghanistan women, and then lesbian solidarity particularly with regard to women in refugee camps, and Mary Audry in Zimbabwe, and Shamsa, to have sessions that are especially on those issues with enough time to bring everyone who wants to come to that together to talk with women in those countries like Great Lakes, Marie-Claire, Marie-Lys, and Mama Kongosi and the other speakers from that, to talk with this wider group of anyone who would like to, about those issues. And again, I can volunteer, but I’m also happy if groups want to set those things up in the future. It’s not as difficult as I thought it was going to be, and we absolutely – I would say – never want to do three sessions a day, because that was quite hard. But to do one session at a time that was good for the organisers, for the facilitators for the region that is going to talk, this kind of thing could be very, very doable. So that’s my final word on looking forward.

**Clara Mazo (Colombia)**: So we are organising the next conference, and about that I would like to say that I really love this methodology that we are using at the moment, at this conference, because it enables us, first of all to get to know all of you better, different Women in Black groups from all over the world. It’s fantastic that we can all see each other, and we can have a chat, and we can talk as if we were all together in the same room. It has been fantastic to listen to all these different experiences, and all of these experiences are of incalculable value. It’s really important because this has shown us how you work, how you carry out these conversations, how you lead them. I’ve really learnt a lot, with regards to Rebecca, who you can see is very excited, very passionate about it. We need to internalise, and process, and digest all of these experiences, and your recommendations for the meeting in Colombia, we’ll take these on board. We would really like you all to come in person, because we want you to be here; it’s not the same if we are all online, but we do understand that there are difficulties involved. For example, we are thinking of holding the meeting somewhere other than Bogota, and I think we really need to make the most of that opportunity for you to come here and really make contact with the women who are here, so it’s a bit sad for us to think that many of you won’t come. I know that we have this virtual alternative, but I’m really awful at all this technology and online things, so in fact I would be thankful for any help you can give me, because I find it very hard sometimes, to get in, to get out, I’m not very good technologically. We could think about having a hybrid, but it would be such a shame if you didn’t come to Colombia – we’d really rather you came!

**Marina Gallego (Colombia):** Thank you also for inviting us to participate in the previous meetings, that was very important for us as well and has helped us with our organisational efforts. As Clara said, this has been a very important conference, dealing with very important issues. Now I think we could think about a hybrid format, depending on where the conference in Colombia will be held, where we choose, because the internet connection isn’t always great across the country, but if we are going to be holding it in a city, then yes, probably that would be possible. The hybrid format itself is great for this sort of session, because we are all here virtually, and it’s easier, we are all on an equal footing and we’re not perhaps losing so much the essence of what we’re trying to do. But it’s not the same to do it virtually, and in person. So the hybrid is a possibility, and yes, we want you to come, I think that’s the main message here. We want you to come because that helps the women in Colombia, it gives them a lot of motivation, it inspires them, makes them feel that people are taking notice of them. Many women in Colombia don’t have a passport, or go anywhere else – it’s not like you, you travel all over the world, but many women here don’t, sometimes they find it difficult to go from one city to another. So for these women, feeling that all these international figures are coming to see them in person is really important because it makes them feel that people care, and it’s fantastic for us. It’s not the same, but if we have to have a streaming channel, we’ll see what we can do, maybe we can do it both ways, some kind of hybrid, but it’s not the same. It’s also not the same to have a hybrid one, or a conference that’s totally online. I think 80 international women came last time we hosted the conference, and there were 200 of us, so a big conference – and I’m sure this next one is going to be more or less the same size. And its difficult to do that online, of course, but I’m sure that we can maybe set up some channels for people from abroad, if they want to join us and listen to the sessions. There are ways round it, there are solutions. Maybe we can stream some sessions – so yes, that would be more possible than totally hybrid. We can sort something out.

**Rebecca Johnson (UK)**: Thank you for considering this. Now I really want to hear from Sue, because as I’ve said two or three times, Sue had the idea to have this online conference, and she pitched it to Liz and Heena and me on a train journey down from Glasgow and by the time the train got to London we had decided we would take this forward, and its been incredibly challenging, but so wonderful. Thank you for having this crazy but wonderful idea! And for helping us make it happen.

**Concha Martin (Spain):** Thank you so much to Marina and Clara, for us its very important to know the experiences of the women in Colombia in a live way. Also for the women working on the ground there, it’s important for them to know that they have so many women who are on their side. Online it is not going to be so strong.

**Sue Finch (UK):** Thank you so much, I think everyone would agree that the best thing of all is seeing each other in person. But it’s just not always practical for everybody. I would love to go to Bogota, or wherever the conference is in Colombia.

I wanted to say a series of thanks. First, thanks to Lepa for suggesting an international advisory group for this conference, because it really helped to include perspectives from across the world, and to shape the conference. But also to weather the storms along the way. Like everyone else, probably, I was feeling very powerless in the face of the genocide going on in Gaza, and the incredible Palestinian women who opened the conference with The War on Gaza and Palestine: Palestinian Women Speak Out, facilitated by the great Rauda and Nabila, speaking about the situation they somehow reminded us that we could be a voice for the voiceless, and inspired us to more action.

It was great to link that to the WiB website session which told us that there had been a 30% increase in demonstrations and vigils this year. Each of the sessions made us feel that it was possible to go on doing what we try to do. Then Yvette Abrahams followed the Palestinian session up by talking about African women’s heritage of peace, a history of South African politics including liberation, Palestine, genocide and ecocideand talked about surviving genocide - her 10 ways to survive genocide, told us wonderful stories, and made us feel that allyship had been a big part of ending apartheid in South Africa. That made it feel worth going on with Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions – it’s the long view that sometimes really helps.

After that Mujeres de Negro in Castello and Valencia talking about Feminists Building Peace gave us the theoretical underpinnings. It’s been a truly extraordinary collection of workshops, we were so lucky with all the speakers. Followed by amazing and heartbreaking testimony from two Afghan women - Sima Samar and Zubaida Akbar - about Gender Apartheid in Afghanistan, facilitated by Lepa and Ariane. They told us how the Taliban were equipped by the USA and Saudi Arabia, banned women from going out without a male relative, and from education. Not allowed to work except in health. But those women haven’t given up, and they asked us to lobby our governments not to recognise the Taliban.

On to Planet Earth, Our Fragile Home: Preventing nuclear war and climate ecocide with Yvonne and Rebecca, reminding us that it’s worth lobbying our governments to make sure that they sign the Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons passed in 2021, and if they have, to ratify. And reminding us that ecocide and genocide are one and indivisible (Rebecca’s quote from Vandana Shiva). Then another extraordinary session – I feel like I’m running out of adjectives to describe how good they were – The Contextualisation of the Women Peace and Security agenda in the Great Lakes, Horn and Sahel regions of Africa on women’s resistance to dehumanisation from armed extractivism there - facilitated by the wonderful Marie-Claire Faray from DRC who talked about the millions displaced, and 6-7 million killed in DRC alone. Marie-Claire reminded us that diamonds are found in many places, but they are mined in Africa because of cheap labour and the slavery of young children. The speakers talked about rape and sexual violence as weapons of war, decolonising resistance, survival, and called on us to detoxify their area and stop arms sales.

We looked at the frighteningly Changing Role of NATO, facilitated by Marie Walsh and Carol Stavris, a wonderfully interactive session followed up by Leena Erasaari talking us through a case study in Finland of how *Militarism robs resources from social policy*. Then yesterday, the wise and wonderful Corinne Kumar spoke about the *International Courts of Women Against Wars, For Peace*,inspiring and beautiful stories about the more than 50 courts of women she has organised across the world, and the great effects they have had. Inviting us to decolonise our structures, our minds, our imaginations as women reclaiming our political voice. It’s hard to believe we have lived through these six days and come out with so much.

Including *Women’s Activism to Stop the War in Gaza*, facilitated by Miri Weingarten, with Dana Yair and Rela Mazali speaking, outlining how important it is to name genocide, and that the government of Israel is perpetrating genocide against Palestinians. Rela talked about naming as a form of action, as a founder of Gun Free Kitchen Tables, Women in Black and New Profile in Israel. Dana, from New Profile, talked about rapidly increasing militarism in Israel at the moment, and about conscientious objectors to military service there.

We looked at *Is Western pacifism colonialist*?with Eva Aneiros and MdN Madrid, another wonderful innovative session using technology. The *WiB Website* session today about holding us together, our connection to each other was such a positive session, because women volunteered to help with managing and fund-raising, so important for all of us, because without it we are not connected. And then the final session from Marina Gallego and Clara Mazo in Colombia about *Women’s role in the peace process* *and the Women in Black conference in Colombia next year* was incredibly inspiring, because women have had such an important role to play in the peace process there. 350 groups of Ruta Pacifica/Women in Black across the country, quite fantastic! Rural women, Black women, lesbians, young women, old women. Since 1996 for Ruta Pacifica, together with Women in Black from 2000, but the armed struggle there has been going on for 60 years – so, again, we get that long perspective. It can feel like we’re not getting anywhere from day to day, but in the long run they have got to a kind of peace, and they are at the table, those amazing women, and organising the next conference, which is also wonderful. So I just wanted to say thank you so much to everyone, and thank you so much to our four fabulous interpreters. There have been over 30 countries represented at this conference, it has been incredible, thank you so much to you all.

**Rebecca Johnson (UK):** Thank you – I would just like to hear from anyone who would like to talk about how you would like to move forwards for peace and justice. Liz was one of the original WiB in London, going back years and years, as Sue and I were, and she put the strapline, if you like, for this conference, as moving forward for peace and justice. She can always just get to the heart of what it is that we want to do in very few words. And I would like us to think about how we can move forward for peace and justice and hear from you how you would like to move forward and increase solidarity with Palestinian women, and how we can move forward with women from the Great Lakes region and other countries that are within the great continent of Africa. How can we move forward to tackle the violence in our home countries, and the impacts of war on Ukraine. How can we give more solidarity to each other? In loving, and caring, and actively – because non-violence has to be active, or it is nothing. Pacifism has to be active, and disrupt militarism, or it is nothing.

**Marianne Laxen (Finland)**: I represent the new small group from Finland, and I would like to say that we - or I - am very practically organised. Some of the meetings were very inspiring, as you said. But first of all, I want to thank you for organising this. It was really good for all of us to have listened to these different sessions. Then I have two proposals: One proposal is to have some sort of email list, like the NO to NATO women have, some sort of possibility to discuss between activists in different countries. The other proposal is that we should have the same message, every now and then, in all the countries, when we have our vigils. Especially, I think, the situation in Palestine is one that is close to all our hearts. To say in our vigil that this is the message that is delivered in every part of the world where there are Women in Black. It would be good to say that it’s not only us, we have the same message in every country.

**Rebecca Johnson (UK):** Thank you, we’ll collect these ideas. But Women in Black has never been an organisation, we are a network, a collection of organisations and activists.

**Lieve Snellings (Belgium):** I first want to say that when your idea came up to have a digital conference, I felt so sorry because I would love to have come in person, and with all the bad things happening in the world, my morale was low also. I’m so sorry I couldn’t come the first day, but from the second day, going through all these days I could see you, of course I couldn’t touch you, but it was so heartfelt, and so warm, and energising, and so beautiful. I think, even for the next conference, I probably won’t be able to go to Colombia, although I would love to, but being there in person, I agree, is the tops. On the other hand, seeing each other over six days (five for me) was so incredibly energising. And the suggestion from Rebecca, I really hope that we can do that regularly, and it gives an extra thing to keep on going.

As for the suggestion of Marianne Laxen from Finland, I want to say that we have an international Women in Black mailing list. I will write my email address in the chat, everybody who wants to join, just send me an email saying that you were at the conference, with your full name and where you are from, and what group. I thank you so much for your organising, and this international group to build up the conference, that is genius. Thank you to all of you who were in that group, and to you four – thank you very much.

**Corinne Kumar (India)**: I just want to say a little poem, for the four of you especially, but for everybody in the conference, and this is from a Sufi poet, and you know Sufism was a very important part of our thinking, and our being in India, so I’m going to read a little of this poem from Hafiz. He says:

*For no reason at all, I begin to dance like a child*

*For no reason at all, I begin to skip like a child*

*For no reason I become a leaf and the wind carries me high*

*So high that I can touch the sun, kiss the sun*

*For no reason at all a thousand songbirds make of my head a conference table*

*And pass their songbooks along with cups of wine*

*For no reason at all, I begin to skip like a child*

*And yet, for every reason in the world, for every reason in existence*

*I love eternally, and unconditionally*

And that’s my message to all of you, from Celine and me, to thank everybody for the six days that we have been together. We have learnt so much, and I hope to continue somewhere to give our little kind of whatever we do, and to take so much also from each one. Thank you.

**Celine Jaya (India):** Thank you so much for making this more than halfway in person, so lovely to see each one so close, and to hear your voices, and to express, and the four of you, to put it so brilliantly, when there’s so many issues, in such a short time. Thank you Rebecca, Liz, Sue and Heena and all the others who participated, thank you so much.

**Rauda Morcos (Palestine):** I want to also thank you, the four of you - I mean Liz, Rebecca, Heena and Sue – I only tasted part of the challenges through the International Advisory Group, I only took a very small part in being in charge of the Palestine Israel session, I know it was a challenging one. It made me think a lot, and change, of course, a lot over the past few months and ever since, you know my daily work is about Palestine, things are only getting worse, there is nothing around me showing any kind of positivity happening. But at the same time, looking around, it actually emphasises the need for an international call to end this ethnic cleansing, this genocide. I mean, if this call doesn’t come out from us as Women in Black, it will mean a loss, a loss for all of us.

Each day there is a story, I’m sure, each day brings another number of victims from all over Palestine, Israel. Some of them are part of the ongoing war, and many of them are totally not related, and they are just being victims of this horrific ethnic cleansing and genocide. And I think you know we couldn’t succeed as an International Advisory Group to put out a call to do this. But I’m calling for the ones who are already here, if you see the importance, if you also agree, that we should put this call out, and you agree that we do it, as this conference ends I will be delighted to take the last copy we did and forward it to the International list. I would think it would be a very important message to come out from us as women who want to end all kinds of wars. We really think its needed now as I am really logged in to my channels at work, what’s happening in the Jordan valley, what’s happening in the south of Hebron, or in the West Bank, as well as today’s shots at Allenby Bridge, and the reactions all over Palestine. I think we need to stop this bloodshed really, and the least we can do is just say stop it, stop this war, stop this genocide, and stop this ethnic cleansing. And that’s my call to everyone. And I hope it will go on really, and if you think we need to vote for that, just do it in the chat. If you disagree, just put disagreement in the chat.

**Rebecca Johnson (UK):** We did get very close to something that could be agreed in the Advisory Group. I’m just wondering if you would be willing to work with us. I absolutely hear your call, and you’re right, if we could put out something that was true and powerful and a clear statement, it would be from everybody that is here, and all the countries that you are all from. We obviously can’t negotiate a text here, but we did have an almost text. Would you be willing to work behind the scenes, maybe using that one as a basis, because I know that it got close? But we would need to be updating. I think a lot of women did hope, and you have brought that hope back here in this final session, that Women in Black could say something on behalf of all of us, something quite short perhaps, less than one page as we were seeking to do. That is loving and caring but also powerful and demanding, not just the end to the war but the end to the Occupation would be the central elements of that. I know we can’t negotiate now, but maybe over the next couple of weeks we could reflect and try to do that, because I’m hearing you say this and I’m seeing so many women in the chat saying this now.

**Rauda Morcos (Palestine):** I can of course help, behind the scenes, in front of the scenes, I don’t really care what the key consequences will be if I put my name behind any statement against this country, Israel. Of course, I feel like after that attempt at putting out an international call against this genocide I have gained only some enemies back home, disagreeing with my views, which I feel a loss, that this happened. But as a Palestinian who lives in the so-called Israel, I feel obligated to my people. And I am part of the Palestinian community, I cannot disbar myself from them just because I live in this place, and I hope this is understandable. I know there are legal consequences to any word I could say, especially genocide, and so-called Israel, and other words. But I am willing to take those risks.

**Liz Khan (UK):** Just to say that the statement we wrote was back in June, and so many more horrendous things have happened since, so it would need updating, and to come from all of us that have been here now, I think, rather than the very small group that wrote that.

**Mama Kongosi (DRC)**: I just want to say in the name of all the women of Africa in the Great Lakes region, Sahel and the Horn of Africa mainly, many thanks for opening for us this safe space where we could speak openly about the struggle of women in Africa. It has been the voice for voiceless people, really talking about what was happening, what is still happening in our region up to now. So the one who spoke right now was saying that it’s hard to say the word. But we are taking the courage of saying that it’s genocide, even in the Congo. Just before finishing, when we were speaking on Monday, we found that there were 200 people who had been buried in Goma town, and more than 200 people killed in Kinshasa that day. So that is genocide going on, and we have to speak about it openly. Yesterday I was really touched by the women from Israel speaking about what is happening in Israel, and especially in Gaza, and teaching young children in Israel hatred, that is horrible. So what we can do is raise our voices and say ‘Enough is enough for the bloodshed!’ Not only in the Congo, but all over the place where people have been killed, and women are struggling, in Afghanistan, Colombia, so once again, many thanks for what you have done to bring us all together, we are waiting to share more in the future. Thank you.

**Rebecca Johnson (UK):** Thank you so much, Mama Kongosi, I just want to thank you for your courage, and strength, and the power of what you do in the Great Lakes region, particularly in DRCongo, and also of course in the UK where I know you live in Bradford. Thank you.

**Ana Valdes (Uruguay)**: First of all, thank you to the London crew, you really did a wonderful job in this conference and without you we would not have been able to have it. As many say, this meeting has been inspiring and we are going from here with so much strength.

As many of you know, I have cancer so was not able to interpret this time, as I did in Uruguay and Bangalore and so many other times. I wanted to say I am possibly going back to Sweden, and I will be trying to work with the new Finnish and Danish groups to start maybe a Scandinavian group, a Nordic group, to connect Denmark, Sweden and Finland, because I think the three countries are very near the war in Ukraine, and the three countries have now joined NATO, and we are going to try to oppose NATO in all ways, and to have a campaign against fascism. Thank you to all of you who have been sending me support.

**Heena Thompson (UK):** A really quick update for those who joined the fantastic meeting about lesbian solidarity and action on Friday. I’ve just had a message that one of the others arrived in Canada from the refugee camp, and for those who very kindly and generously donated a small amount of money, that has gone for food and sanitary wear to the women who are still in the refugee camp. So thank you to you.

**Sian Jones (Spain, ex London)**: I just wanted to say that there is space on the website for the information that we got from the women living in the Great Lakes region, Sahel and the Horn of Africa. So I think if we could actually represent their contribution at the conference, if you could put me in touch with them, I will ask them for some of the materials that they showed and I can put something together because we have a piteous gap in our coverage of, I think, the largest continent (or maybe its Europe? but anyway ..).

The second thing is, there’s going to be a gap on the front page of the website, and I know you have to make a decision and write something that’s nuanced and wonderful, but you know I could put on a graphic that just says: ‘End the genocide!’. Maybe that’s a bit previous, but let’s not hang about.

**Rebecca Johnson (UK):** What I was going to suggest was that Rauda, and I understood Rauda to have volunteered that she would look at the first draft, with Nabila also, and then come back to us with one that can be shared through Lieve, and through Yolanda, in the different languages and discussed and finalised. I don’t mind doing the finalising thing again, but the process we had before was not humane.

**Rauda Morcos (Palestine):** I agree totally with Rebecca, its not a good way to do it reversed. I would think first to share it with women who participated in the Palestinian panel on the first day, I will take their notes, and me and Nabila will finalise it. I would be delighted if others like Yvonne, Hannah and Dalia would look at it, and then after that I would send it to you, Rebecca and Sue, Liz and Heena, and look at it in terms of English, and context as well.

**Rebecca Johnson (UK):** And actually, because we had these three amazing speakers yesterday - Miri Weingarten, Rela Mazali and Dana Yair – would you be happy also to include these activists on the war?

**Rauda Morcos (Palestine):** Yes, share their emails, I know Rela well, and probably know the others, perhaps you are not saying their names in a way I recognise! But we are not going to deal with the numbers, we are talking about people. Numbers are growing every day, and it’s horrible to talk about Palestinians in terms of numbers only. It’s a matter of genocide and ethnic cleansing, and it’s happening to all of us Palestinians, all over, and that’s the message – to end the genocide.

**Rebecca Johnson (UK)**: And that’s where the agreement fell down, and of course - as Liz said - so much more tragedy and horrors have also happened since. If we do it as you’ve suggested, you have the draft, use it or don’t use it, but it’s there as a guide if you wish. You can bring us in when you are ready, if you want to. Let’s see where it goes – and I’m not seeing anyone in the chat against it in any way. We will support you in any possible way we can.

**Yvonne Deutsch (Israel)**: I of course support the suggestions of Rauda, in the last meeting I was surprised that we didn’t have a declaration about the genocide. What I want to mention, for everybody to be clear, is that all the women who were mentioned – Hannah, Dalia, Rela, Dana and Miri - who lives in England I understand – including me, we are activists but we are not Women in Black, we are not standing as Women in Black. I do feel identification as a Woman in Black, but we are not standing as Women in Black, so I just want it to be clear.

**Heena Thompson (UK)**: We think of you as Women in Black!

**Yvonne Deutsch (Israel)**: OK! I just wanted to be clear. We are all activists!

**Rebecca Johnson (UK)**: Yes, that is true. And when we first started this, we were all aware that Sue, for example, for many reasons cannot stand on Wednesdays in the vigil, but she’s absolutely a Woman in Black, and I have now moved out of London so I’m never in that vigil, but sometimes go to the Brighton one. I think that there was a misunderstanding really early on, when we first wrote to, I think it was you, Yvonne, and Hannah and Dalia, and this got sent to a group that stands. The key point that I want to make is that there are other groups, like Ruta Pacifica, that identify with Women in Black, but clearly has the name Ruta Pacifica in most of what it does. This has always been the case since Women in Black grew from the original vigil in Jerusalem, that different women have picked it up and changed it for themselves in their countries and places, grown it in different ways, always with a feminist action against war, action for peace and justice as absolutely central. But we’ve never said that it had to have a criterion that you couldn’t be a Women in Black unless you’re on a vigil! I was as surprised as well as a lot of others that this criterion was suddenly applied to something that we hadn’t expected. I just want to make a personal plea that Women in Black always remains autonomous feminist peace activists and groups, whether or not individuals that are part of that are able to do vigils. I hope we can still be part of that network.

**Lepa Mladenovic (Serbia)**: Thank you, thank you! Thank you for this incredible meeting, I was every day for six hours thinking this is really fantastic. I just wanted to add, I think this is a question for us, as Yvonne Deutsch said just now, there are many activists who do not identify with the local Women in Black, but they are international women. They come to the international Women in Black conferences, and for some reason do not identify with the local, that’s one thing. And the second thing is that in some places where there were Women in Black, there is no more Women in Black, so they are again only international Women in Black, just to give this wider picture of who Women in Black are. Thank you and thank you!

**Rebecca Johnson (UK)**: Women in Black gets picked up by feminist peace activists with enormous courage, like in Russia, and they are not able to stand in any vigil. Liz, please tell us a little more about how you came into contact with them, and brought us into contact with them as well?

**Liz Khan (UK)**: In one of the workshops somebody spoke about these women, they are Russian women who can’t ever stand together. We went to an exhibition where I saw these amazing paintings of photographs that I can share. I think they may well be on the WiB website. And we made them up into great big posters, almost life-size. These are individual women in Russia, or groups of two who go out, dressed in black with a white rose or white flower, holding posters, a photograph, then they move off very, very quickly. Those women could get a 10-year prison sentence with hard labour for doing that. So there is opposition in Russia to the war on Ukraine, but it takes very brave women to stand up and oppose it.

**Sue Finch (UK)**: And the amazing thing is, they call themselves Women in Black, on their posters saying Stop the War.

**Rebecca Johnson (UK)**: And they dress in black, and identify . . Thank you Liz, it’s really important. The other thing is that Liz found that, and brought us there, and we all went to the exhibition by a diaspora Russian artist called Katya, who was outside of Russia and can’t go back, and she made paintings or charcoal drawings of the photographs that women had put up on social media. In many cases they had a flower or blank piece of paper over their faces, because they are gagged. It connects up art, and Women in Black, and campaigning in these incredible, brave ways. And we took that whole exhibition, courtesy of Maypole funding, to Glasgow for the FiLiA conference last year (attended by 1800 women from 35 countries). There are all these things going on that we don’t necessarily know about.

**Concha Martin (Spain)**: Thank you for allowing me to talk a little bit about the Russian women. They are anti-war Russian feminists. They go out onto the street as Women in Black, and they are organised into tiny little cells, in Russia and abroad as well. So they are small cells – in Russia, they have got to be really careful in anything that they do so that they don’t put themselves or their relatives in danger. One of the things that they talk about most is protection measures, and how things need to be done in Russia. But the cell that they have in the UK - there are a couple in the UK, I think there’s one in Bristol, I can’t tell you any more about that, but they have carried out really interesting activities. There’s an initiative in Paris as well, they’ve been up and running for a while. Some of these exhibitions are of photos of themselves, dressed in black, there’s a lot of them outside Russia. When they are in Russia, its just 1,2, maybe 3 women, and their work is as anti-militarist activists – they should probably be telling you this. They give advice on how not to go to war, they support conscientious objectors, they provide humanitarian aid. A really interesting initiative that they have as well is in the Russian school system. In the education system there are more and more classes about the important things, apparently, basically they are militarising young minds. So the women have designed an anti-lesson programme to counteract this militarism. They do a lot of work, it’s broad ranging, it’s intense, the work that they carry out. They do call themselves Women in Black, and they are basically activists and work for peace and against militarisation and also for the rights of women, because of the repression. Homosexuals are also being repressed in that country; abortion is also prohibited. They help conscientious objectors, they support them, they tell them what they have to do to avoid being sent to the front and provide advice to anyone who asks them for help. So it’s a group that maybe our colleagues in Colombia could take into account. You can find them on the internet, or we can tell you where they are, and maybe send you the map – they have developed a map of where they are. There’s about 30 in Russia, and more outside, and their exhibitions are always worth viewing. There is a lot to say, but their main focus is on conscientious objectors, defending the rights of women and minorities, and trying to help Ukrainians, respecting Ukrainian pacifists.

**Rebecca Johnson (UK)**: Thank you, Concha, and I think this is a great place to end the conference, looking forward to connecting with new women, working for, campaigning for, being brave enough to stand against militarism and for justice and peace and women’s rights.

**Sue Finch (UK)**: Thank you, Concha, I think the women in Russia have been organising for quite a few years before, but we just didn’t all know about them. Thank you to everybody, the participants more than anybody, because you made this conference fantastic. The speakers, because you are all incredible, we’ve learnt so much. The organisers in the International Advisory group, you’re just brilliant. This has been an amazing experience. We were terrified just before it started, that everything would fall apart. So grateful to you all for being incredible. Can’t wait for Colombia next! Thank you so much, and our lovely interpreters, who put up with a lot – thank you!

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