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Towards a Different Commonsense: From Battlefield to Household - Reducing Violence, Transforming Gender Relations

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Good morning. It's such a pleasure to be with you here this morning. Thank you to the United Nations Association for inviting me, and thank you for that generous introduction.

Before I begin, I'd like to stress something about my work : these books that … .. mentioned, they're all the outcome of empirical research, research 'in the field'. They analyse, discuss, present and summarize what I've learned from other people – from antimilitarist, antiwar and peace activists, in groups and organizations, some of them mixed, organizations of men and women, some of women only. Some have been in the UK, a country that exports wars, but most have been in other war zones. My work has been to study their circumstances, try to understand their strategies, their alliances, their analyses, to grasp their standpoint on violence, war and peace. Then, in writing, I try to put my understanding out and about, and invite discussion, in the hope that we may learn from each other and strengthen our movement. That's my hope in being here today, so I'm going to leave plenty of time for discussion.

In this talk I thought I'd introduce four concepts that I've derived from these experiences "out there". By concepts, all I mean is notions, little elements that are useful in building theories. By theories, all I mean is explanations of how things may work. Where I can, as I talk, I'm going to invoke activists in different countries who I've heard making a case for these ways of thinking.

- The first is the concept of a **continuum of violence -** the notion that violence of different types, on different scales and in different periods can usefully be perceived as a series, a succession of events that have something in common and may be causally linked**.**

- Second, **patriarchy as one of the causes of war** – 'patriarchy' is just a shorthand word, I'll explain carefully what I mean by it as we go along.

- Third, **violence reduction** - which I propose we might think of as a minimum shared goal of otherwise rather varied peace movements;

- And finally, **commonsense**, the hegemony of a way of thinking, the possibility of generating a new and different sense of what's normal and acceptable.

First then, **the continuum of violence.** In the last few weeks you've probably been reading about India, the terrible gang rape and murder of a physiotherapy student in Delhi, and the huge mobilizations of women, and some men too, that have resulted, protesting against male violence against women. You might say – what's this got to

do with militarism and war? Well, the idea of a “continuum of violence” suggests that they aren’t in fact *un*-connected.

If you’re interested in reading, I recommend a nice fat anthology called *Violence in War and Peace* by Nancy Schleper-Hughes and Philippe Bourgois – and particularly their introduction, “Making sense of violence”. The articles they’ve brought together in their book describe a lot of different kinds of violence, and they argue that we need to make a conceptual leap so as to see the links between them – especially between acts of violence in everyday life in normal times, and those that occur in the abnormal episodes we call war.

One way of alerting ourselves to links like that is to take a gender lens to violence, so as to see the masculine-feminine dimension, gendered causes and effects. We know there’s rape in an Indian bus on a weekday evening in peacetime. But we know too that there’s militarized rape in India, for instance in the emergencies in the North East and in Kashmir. The continuum between peace and war is helpfully clear when it’s a matter of rape. But there are other ways of seeing it too. We live in a violence continuum – *continua* actually, in the plural – along several axes.

For instance, a continuum of scale of force: so many pounds per square inch when a fist hits a jaw; so many more when a bomb hits a military target.

A continuum on a social scale: violence in a couple, in a street riot, violence between nations.

And place: a bedroom, a street, a police cell, a continent.

Time: during a long peace, pre-war, in armed conflict, in periods we call ‘postconflict’.

And then type of weapon: hand, boot, machete, gun, missile.

Long before I read the book *Violence in War and Peace* I’d been alerted to the “continuum” idea by women in Okinawa. Okinawa is a cluster of islands that now belong to Japan. It was was once an independent kingdom, Riyukyu, and a lot of Okinawans still feel resentful of Japanese domination. But they feel colonized by the USA too. Three-quarters of the massive US military presence in Japan is actually based on these islands, which are less than 1% of Japan’s land area. The place is groaning under the weight of concrete and razor wire. Nowhere is free of the roar of helicopters and armoured vehicles. Or the demands of US soldiers for rest and recreation – in other words, access to women’s bodies.

In 1995, three US Marines abducted and raped a 12-year old Okinawan girl near a military base. Women mobilized an island-wide protest. A couple of months later some of the women set up an organization, OWAM – Okinawa Women Act Against Military Violence. They researched and publicized the hundreds of acts of violence against Okinawan women by US soldiers since 1945.

A few years ago I went to spend time with OWAM, join in some of their activities and talk with the women. Now, the thing is this - OWAM are an integral part of the mainstream (male and female) antimilitarist and peace movement of Okinawa. Its main thrust is opposing the Japan-US Security Treaty, the *ampo* as it’s called.

These women are a well-known and respected part of the anti-*ampo* movement. But they're different, in a particular way. Yes, with the rest, they join protests against threats of massive violence. For instance, they 'll protest the visit of a US nuclear-armed submarine to a Japanese port. But - among the forces of coercion they perceive as threats, as wrong, they include the fist - or the erect penis if you like – of the individual perpetrator of violence. These may be puny little weapons on the scale of physical force, but they're devastating in their effect on the individual victim. OWAM allow for absolutely no separation between the issue of the Security Treaty and that of the abuse of women. 'Security' is a word with a very big meaning for them.

Men of the anti-*ampo* movement are also angered by soldier rapes. But what they tend to say is "Look how these Americans trample on 'our women' and 'our Okinawan land!". In this way they reduce women's bodies to Riyukyuan property. OWAM resist this. They point out that foreign soldiers aren't the only perpetrators of rape and domestic assault in Okinawa. Japanese and Okinawan men do it too. Some of the women decided to act against sexual violence in the civilian population. They set up a sister organization to OWAM, the Rape Emergency Intervention and Counselling Centre – REICO. One of OWAM's founders and its coordinator is Suzuyo Takazato. She points to the continuum linking acts of physical coercion at different time periods – and on a range of scales, by a range of perpetrators, in a range of locations. Violence against women, she says, is a significant part of global violence.The military is a violence-generating system. Patriarchy is a violence-generating social order.

That already introduces the second concept, the second theme, I want to talk about: patriarchy, and not just patriarchy as a particular set of gender relations, but **patriarchy as causally implicated in war.** Now, I know this sounds far out. Even to use the word 'patriarchy' can make you sound extremist. Or just old fashioned, out-dated. The women who persuaded me that we just can't do without a concept of patriarchy are a group called *Zene u Crnom*, or Women in Black, in the city of Belgrade, the capital of Serbia. I pay careful attention to what they say, because they really know what they're talking about - they lived through the transformation of a peaceful Serbia, in a federal Yugoslavia, into a militarist, nationalist society bent on ethnic cleansing.

Yugoslavia under the League of Communists had introduced formal gender equality. At least it was assumed women would work, on equal terms with men, and there was state child-care to enable it. The official equality policy didn't deliver everything it promised, of course. And a feminist movement grew in the 1970s to demand more. But… women began to value what they'd already achieved when they began to lose it. As nationalist ideology surged through Serbia, and state socialism was in retreat, the new ideologues had a definite gender agenda. They were proclaiming a 'demographic threat' from Muslims' higher birthrate, the "white plague". Serb women must stay home and get pregnant. A good Yugoslav woman used to be the one who built socialism by her labour power. Now, the good Serb woman was the patriot who would regenerate the nation by mothering its sons. Reproductive rights women had taken for granted came under attack. Their public status too. In Yugoslavia women had a quota of 30% of seats on public bodies. In the first multiparty elections of 1990 the quota was dropped, and women's represention collapsed to less than 2%. The thing is this…women could hardly fail to notice that the nationalism now dominating politics, pervading the media and filling the streets was not only militarist – it was also and quite specifically masculinist. The Orthodox

church had come out of wraps. The religious leaders, filling the airwaves, urging on the national revival, were patriarchy in a pure, unmitigated form that young Yugoslavs had never encountered before.

Clearly, if the warmongers were doing patriarchy, war-resisters had to do feminism. Stasa Zajovic was an activist in the Centre for Antiwar Action. It was male-led. It showed no signs of adapting in order to resist the virulent masculinism as well as the virulent nationalism. So she and other women left the mixed movement, and set up *Zene u Crnom* – Women in Black. The name was suggested to them by Italian women supporters, who had adopted it from the Israeli women of the anti-Occupation movement.

Stasa and other Belgrade feminists wrote a lot, they were great communicators. Travelling, speaking, they spread far and wide in those years a feminist antimilitarist standpoint, forged in the fire of the Yugoslav disaster. It was an analysis that said : Yes, war is caused by the nation state system, with its claims to territory and ethnic singularity, its hatred of foreigners. And yes, global capitalism is a cause of war. Because they saw how the IMF's structural adjustment policy had brought economic misery to Yugoslavia in the 1980s, so that angry unemployed men became disillusioned with the communist system. (Which of course is just what the Western powers hoped.) But they said – also – not instead but also – *patriarchy*, a male-dominant sex-gender system, ages old but still alive today, has to be recognized as one of the causes of war.

Let me say a bit more about patriarchy. Such a concept becomes necessary as soon as you think in terms of power, the structuring of societies in terms of power relationships. When you do it's immediately clear that organized society from the time of the first city states and early empires to the present moment has been structured by a number of kinds of power. There's always been economic class power – a few own property, accumulate surpluses; and the subordinated many who don't, whose value resides in their capacity to work, to soldier, or breed. It also becomes obvious that the holding and naming of territory, the creation of 'us', within the city walls or the empire's borders, and 'them' outside – the citizen and the barbarian, the white man and the coloured races – that's also a pervasive power relation. Thinking this way, in terms of relations of power, you can't avoid seeing at least one more. Gender is a persistent power relation too. There's scant evidence of very early matriarchies. In the history of civilizations it's men who have dominated, with women, at best, being valued possessions, sometimes surrogate men (Cleopatra, Bodicea), but at worst just commodities. These three sets of power relations, of class, race and sex, are of course totally interlocked: the ones controlling resources and defining identities tend to be men.

When people say, surely that's all in the past…. Well, no. You can see quite a primeval patriarchy living on in some societies – think of the gender relations embodied in sharia law. But it continues in the west too, in more subtle ways. How does a male dominance system survive, modulated but real enough, into modern times and Western societies? It adaptively reproduces itself from one generation, one epoch, to the next by the social construction of masculine and feminine in particular forms. We're culturally shaped in childhood, in youth, in adult life in ways, some subtle, some obvious, as two kinds of person, unequal and complementary. Boys are shaped to fit them for dominance, to become people with a sense of entitlement, with qualities that make them adequate to power, competitive, combative, disposed to the

use of force, specialists in violence. Women are shaped to see men as important, to be liable to comply, to experience being dominated as erotic. We don't all comply of course. Some rebels escape the shaping. Some men do – I'm thinking of some gay men in Turkey for instance – conscientious objectors who've publicly ridiculed militarized masculinity. And feminism itself is a largescale refusal of the shaping. But the majority conform. And it's this patriarchal gender relation, the women of Belgrade, and many other antiwar feminists, tell us, that makes war thinkable. Makes violence normal. Predisposes us to support leaders who say: send in the marines.

Which is why, some women are saying, transforming gender relations can be classed as work for peace. Feminist activism against patriarchy not only is a part of peace activism, it's an irreducibly necessary part. What is more, men have to see not masculine loss but human gain in such transformative change, and bring their critique of the way masculinity is exploited for militarism into their antiwar activism. Peace movements won't reach their goal without it.

With that in mind I'd like to say a bit about what that goal might be thought to be. And this is my third concept: **violence reduction as a goal** of antiwar, antimilitarist and peace movements.

In the research I did for this book "*Antimilitarism*" I visited six countries and encountered a lot of widely different antimilitarist movements and moments. Think of the UK alone. We have Stop the War Coalition, an alliance that's great at turning out thousands on the street. We have CND, a sustained movement against nuclear weapons. We have the Campaign Against the Arms Trade. We have the sturdy century-old Women's International League for Peace and Freedom and the rather fragile network Women in Black – we organize a little street vigil around the Edith Cavell statue in London every Wednesday. In the UK peace movement we have Quaker groups, secularist groups, conscientious objectors. And so on.

As I wrote the final chapter I had to ask myself – what's the scope of this movement of movements, what aim can it be said to share? Admittedly the cases I examined weren't a random sample – such a thing in such a field isn't possible. Besides, I'd drawn arbitrary borders - I decided not to include conciliation projects, for instance, or organizations doing mainly humanitarian responses to war. I didn't include movements against oppressive and exploitative economic and social systems that harm and kill through hunger and deprivation – although that is sometimes called violence, 'structural violence'. A lot of peace activists do *also* belong to the global movement for human rights, for food justice and so on. But I've preferred to see that as a separate movement. The groups, organizations and networks I studied were centrally concerned with *physical* violence, the means and forces of coercion.

After a lot of thought and reading, I came to the conclusion that one idea we might share is this: that *violence is elective, discretionary.* It's a course of action that can be chosen, or un-chosen. In most circumstances, we, as individuals, as groups, and as a society, can choose a less violent or more violent course of action. Society-wide, this is a minority view. The prevailing idea, I think, is that violence is a fact of life. It's deplorable, but it's natural. It's in our genes. It's our fate.

This is an essentialist and immobilizing belief, and it's very useful to our rulers, to the ones who profit from war, politically or economically, those who have an interest in sustaining militarization. It justifies an ever-expanding security industry and

heavy policing on the home front too. Unfortunately even some parts of the Left feel an affinity for the assault rifle. Some see revolutionary violence as necessary – and indeed as cathartic. Peace movements, by contrast, are defined precisely by rejecting such fatalism, whether biological or historical. We don't proclaim the possibility of a totally violence-free world – we're not that naïve. But all the same we propose a project of violence-reduction.

This circles back to what we were saying just now – the idea that violence, its types, scale, levels and moments, can be visualized as a continuum. Actually the word continuum really only suggests that instances of violence are a series, with a similarity that connects one to the next. It doesn't necessarily mean they're causally connected. In many cases there's a lack of empirical study to test it. Implicitly, though, I think our movements do believe that there are causal links. Men who are trained to be combative are not likely to be conciliatory in the family. Kids who spend their days zapping the enemy in video games are likely to have a lower threshhold in responding to a challenge in the school playground. And so on.

In this light, certain kinds of cultural activism can be seen as an important component of peace movements. And nothing is more cultural than gender, the values we ascribe to male and female, the power relations we enact, represent, promote.

The place I learned most about cultural work for peace was South Korea. I found, roughly speaking, three kinds of movement there. One is antimilitarist, active and loud in opposing things like - the South Korean government buying certain fighter aircraft, or contributing troops to NATO's wars. Second, there's a strong movement that looks for partners in North Korea and works for reunification. You can see there'd be tension between the two – the first is strongly opposed to all nuclear weapons; the second is tolerant of the nuclear missile programme of North Korea. But there's a third and different kind of peace work that goes on in South Korea, and does a lot to span the gap between the other two. I'll tell you about two organizations that are characteristic of this.

One is *Women Make Peace*. Elli Kim, who's one of its founders and activists was my research companion and interpreter in Korea, so I got a feel for what they're about. *Women Make Peace* have existed for twenty years. They have an office, with three fulltime and five part-time staff – it's for real. They call themselves autonomous feminists. And they have a strong belief that to engage effectively in struggles for peace you have to start with nonviolence in your own life. They choose their words carefully, to avoid the habitual violence in the language we use. For them, the violence of war doesn't only occur in war, it's intimately related to the violence of everyday life. So their projects include meditation and discussion groups, and above all, peace education, from a feminist perspective.

The second group that has something of the same philosophy is *People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy*, PSPD, and its Centre for Peace and Disarmament, and its journal *Korea Peace Report.* I met two of its activists, both called Lee. Lee Tae-Ho told me he believes demilitarization and eventual reunification of the two Koreas are linked. Whereas the reunification movement defends N.Korea's nuclear weapons and thinks "North and South must unite against US power in the region", PSPD say "let's admit there are problems in both North and South Korean society, let's unite to deal with them – let's transform both states". They call their

initiative “the peace state” idea. They mean a state in which the “security” paradigm is replaced by a “peace” paradigm. The other Lee, Lee Dae-Hoon, says the security state constructs fictitious external threats for purposes of internal control. This process is guaranteed through the combination of patriarchy, specifically male supremacy (he actually uses those words), and authoritarianism, and other non-democratic belief systems. The state should not be allowed to monopolize security affairs, as it does. Civil society ought to trespass on that terrain, he says. We ought to “social”-ize and “civil”-ize security. And together, the civil societies of countries in the region should work to reduce their militarization and together create what he calls an “East Asia Common House”. It’s an idea, a vision. Are PSPD just dreaming? Or could their idea prevail?

And here I come to my fourth and final concept, **hegemony and counter-hegemony,** what is or becomes a society’s **‘common sense’.** Antonio Gramsci, from his prison cell in fascist Italy, pointed out that not all ruling classes need to use physical coercion to get their way. Not every state is a police state. In a lot of cases people consent to be ruled. They’re swayed by dominant ideas, the cultural and political hegemony of the ruling class. The hegemonic account of the world is the popular ‘common sense’. Let’s say: capitalism is the only realistic way of ordering society. Wealth trickles down. Deny it and you sound just a bit crazy, marginal. Gramsci wrote about the potential for the working class and its progressive alliances to gain adherents beyond their limited numbers, by force of a convincing idea. “Another world is possible”. That counter-hegemonic ideology could become the new common sense.

I think that notion can be useful in working to achieve a less violent society. Antimilitarist and peace movements are vital in addressing immediate issues: like abolishing nuclear weapons, challenging the use of drones. But the bigger potential of our movement of movements lies I think in widespread, longterm, many-sided cultural work, work that aims to make some thoughts unthinkable and new thoughts thinkable. Come back for a moment to this extraordinary worldwide movement that’s underway at this moment – sparked by revulsion at that rape and murder in India with which I started this talk. Two days ago on February 14 there were flashmobs and other actions all over the world. In London alone there were 19 events. If it could only hold. And spread to all kinds of violence. A new commonsense.

Take children. The old commonsense: boys will be boys! A different commonsense: boys are human beings, we can choose the qualities we encourage in them, and those we discourage.

Think about the gun lobby in the USA. Commonsense says: your personal security demands a weapon. A different commonsense says: the more weapons, the more deadly the violence.

Think about the war on terror. The old commonsense: the only thing that’ll stop the terrorists is to bomb them in their caves, or in their desert encampments. A different commonsense: justice for Palestinians, and similar changes in Western foreign policy, might be the best way to disarm jihadists.