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Gender and Militarism

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Warmest thanks...to Ezgi Saritas and others.

To talk about 'gender and militarism' in Turkey is what we'd call in England 'carrying coals to Newcastle'. What could I possibly tell you that you don't already know - and know better than me? The work Turkish antimilitarist feminists have done as researchers, writers and activists is well known far beyond the borders of Turkey. Ayse-Gul Altinay's wonderful book *The Myth of the Military Nation* is on our bookshelves! We followed the work of Amargi with admiration and were sad to see it close. So, I feel very hesitant speaking on this theme here, and am really looking forward more to the discussion we can have, after this talk, where I can continue to learn from you.

I thought I'd structure my talk this way....I'm going to start by bringing you some news 'from the frontline' so to speak: specifically from the war in Syria and the aftermath of war in Bosnia-Herzegovina. And I'm going to be stressing the gender of war, *from women's perspective*. Then I'm going to turn the topic of women on its head and ask: where are men in this story? Because I'm going to suggest that many, many writers and activists do start in just the way I shall have started: that is, by interpreting 'gender and militarism' as meaning 'women'. And of course they do indeed tell stories that must be heard....

BUT...they mostly don't go on to what is equally necessary, and confront the issue of men and militarism, men and war, men and power. Those who do that, who mention the 'M' word, are often met with hostile responses - 'Are you saying all men are violent?', 'Are you saying it's only men who fight?' and so on. Or you get a tired, defeatist response, 'Well, that's how the world is'.

So I'm going to go on, in this talk, to give a bit of theoretical underpinning that may help us make the case against the critics and the cynics convincingly and confidently: to say that gender is not just an effect of war, it's actually causal - it's one of the factors that keeps armed conflict for ever on the boil. In which case addressing gender power relations has to be seen as necessary work for peace. Which will lead me to end by asking you and me - both - about how we can engage more men in actively opposing the militarization of men, and indeed on rewriting the script of masculinity - on which I think you in Turkey have some useful experience.

OK: women and war. I recently spent five very, very interesting days in Sarajevo at a conference organized by the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom - WILPF, for short. It was only three weeks ago. The idea

of the meeting was that Bosnian women would surely have some useful knowledge to pass on to Syrian women. After all, they survived that terrible war in the 1990s, and experienced a peace process, and since then have had twenty years of 'post conflict' experience. Syria on the other hand is still in the middle of armed conflict. But they know they need to imagine an end to the fighting, and imagine what kind of peace they want when it comes.

There were thirty or forty Bosnian women at the conference. They represented organizations from all over the country - Zene Zenama, Udruzene Zene, Vive Zene and others. Most of them sprang up in the war or just afterwards. Today I'd say they're part of an organized women's movement in Bosnia.

On the Syrian side, nineteen women came to the conference, from a range of organizations, including the Syrian Women's League, Women Now, Refugees not Captives, and Soryat. You may know some of them. Some women came from regime controlled areas, some from areas controlled by the opposition. Some had been displaced and were coming now from refugee camps in Jordan, Lebanon and - of course Turkey.

The immediate spark to this conference was Syrian peace negotiations in Geneva. The first round was in the summer last year. It failed. But it was planned to bring the sides back to Geneva in the new year. WILPF, and other international NGOs, and UN Women have been trying to get these organized women a place in the peace negotiations. Our conference, organized by WILPF, was one of many steps in preparing the women for that engagement.

This is a classic exercise in implementing UN Security Council 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. The demands they're making are just the kind of thing that Resolution was supposed to ensure. A document was drafted late last year with five points. First - they are asking for women to be included in the formal delegations on both sides of the conflict - and not just any women. They should be women sensitive to gender issues and committed to equality. Second they want an independent delegation of women to act as a third party to the talks and represent a diverse and inclusive civil society. (3) They want gender experts and expertise to be present, to keep the negotiators on their toes, and (4) they want gender briefings to be written and available on every point on the agenda. Finally they want to have a body set up back home in Syria, an Independent Civil Society Forum of both women and men so that civil society is consulted in the peacemaking, on the model of the Northern Ireland peace agreement of 1998, which as you probably know was a very good and rare example of the inclusion of civil society.

Meantime, also, a coalition of Syrian women's organizations has also drafted a gender-equal Constitution for a postwar Syria - these women are nothing if not well-prepared. But so far, although between them UN Women and the international NGOs air-lifted around 60 women to Geneva to lobby the second round of peace talks, they were hammering on a closed door. Now they're preparing for the third round: Geneva III.

But ... I want to go back to our Sarajevo conference, which took place just as the second round of peace negotiations was going on. I want to tell you a bit of what the Bosnian and Syrian women were saying to each other - what they told us of the gendered nature of war and post-conflict.

As you know, the Syrian conflict began in 2011 when there was a wave of protests - the Syrian phase of the Arab Spring. It was brutally put down with arrests and shootings. The regime armed Alawites and Shias, aggravating relations with the 60% of the population who are Sunni Muslims. An estimated 100,000 have died by now and more than 9 million have been displaced. They're talking about it as the worst humanitarian crisis of modern times. I'm going to give you a breather for a few seconds while I show some photos I took at the conference.

[POWERPOINT]

I'll tell you the story of Najlāa Alsheekh. She's the young woman on the left, in a white headscarf. She's now a refugee in Turkey. This is what she told us - and I think it's not so different from the stories other women were telling about their own lives in the conflict. Najlāa comes, she says, from the village of Izaz in the extreme north of Syria. Not far from Aleppo - it is about 8 kilometers from the Turkish border. But recently Najlāa, now married, with two young sons, had been living in Daria, a suburb of Damascus. She's clearly a born activist, and was one of the first women to join the demonstrations of 2011. Then her husband was seized and detained - she still has no idea where he is. Next her father, a vulnerable and disabled man, was arrested as he was following a coffin at a friend's funeral. Najlāa simply couldn't bear to see him in captivity, wounded, in ragged underwear. She says she submitted to extreme humiliation by his captors to secure her father's release and take him home.

Then, one night she saw security forces closing in around their home. Dragging her family in their nightclothes across neighbouring roof tops, she slipped the noose, and made her way to the family home in Aleppo, joining other relatives. This was August 2012. Aleppo too was under continual bombardment. When the windows of their home blew in and covered them in glass, they moved on once again, crammed together in a small car, this time to Izaz, the very village where her life had begun. Held by the Free Syrian Army, the village was shelled by regime forces. On a night in which eighty people were killed, a barrel bomb smashed their balcony to the ground, carrying her son with it. At first they told her, 'he's dead'. 'When I heard that,' Najlāa told me, 'I all but died myself'. Miraculously, he wasn't dead - but he was injured. She decided now the best thing to do was to leave Syria. Taking their car, she drove the children and her brother, picked up her aunt and uncle from a hospital where they were being treated, and they all set off north. With one passport between them, she smuggled the entire family across the border to your country, and found herself, as she told me, 'in a place where I didn't even know how to say "hi!"'.

During all these phases of war-affliction, Najlāa had been caring for the displaced people around her. Now, in the town of Kilis, she set up a small project to empower refugee women, obtaining craft materials, teaching

knitting and sewing, finding a market for their products. She calls her small humanitarian NGO 'Dignified Women', and it was as a representative of that, and of the Syrian Non-Violence Movement, *Alharak*, she's a member of, that she applied to attend the Sarajevo conference.

Think about Najlaa for a moment. She's acted in this story as: a wife, a mother, a daughter, a sister and a niece. All womanly familial roles. She's termed a victim and survivor. And she is. But don't say women don't have agency in war time.

As they told such war stories to the Bosnians, the Syrian women often harked back to their 'revolution' of 2011, their moment in the Arab Spring. The street protests had been, they said, 'a strike for dignity' against forty years of overbearing rule by Assad father and son. They'd been completely non-sectarian. They'd opposed all oppressions, the oppression of one religious group by another, of poor by rich, of women by men. Women had been really active and visible. Najlaa told the Bosnian women, 'We didn't know what organization was before that'. Another woman added, 'There was no women's movement at that time. We had to be present in the revolution or not at all'.

But since war broke out, women's interests have been eclipsed, they said, and their lives torn apart. They have new and heavy responsibilities - as we've seen in Najlaa's case.

Now to turn to Bosnia - what the women were intent on telling their Syrian partners amounted to warnings really - warnings of what not to do. Things had gone wrong for them. The General Framework Agreement for Peace signed at Dayton Ohio in 1995, engineered by internationals, had been an agreement made solely between the male nationalist militarist leaders, without a woman in sight. Their key motive was to stay in power and achieve control over the maximum amount of land and resources - if possible cleansed of any but their own people. Not only were women and women's interests totally absent from the peace making, so was civil society as a whole.

Of course ceasefire was desperately needed, people were prepared to pay almost any price to get it. But the big mistake was that the peace negotiation at Dayton was actually also allowed to be a moment of country-building. It designed a constitution, and a very bad one. I don't need to tell you about it - a country of two ethnically-defined entities of almost equal size and power, in constant rivalry. Three presidents, Serb, Croat and Bosniak, each with a power of veto. A far-too-complex administrative structure of cantons and municipalities, each segment a little ethnic state in its own right. Everybody is defined as a minority, with unequal rights, in some part of Bosnia-Herzegovina. And some people are minorities everywhere - for instance people whose families of origin or marriage don't fit the Serb, Croat, Muslim categories. But also other 'others' like Jews and Roma people. The European Court of Human Rights has condemned this constitution - but there seems to be no mechanism now for changing it.

So, the first lesson the Bosnian women pressed on the Syrians was "get in on the peace negotiations". The second was "whatever happens, don't let the peace negotiations decide the future constitution". Nela Porobic told the Syrian women, 'The space we failed to insist on at Dayton we have never recovered later.'

Another theme the Bosnian women stressed was the struggle they've been having for twenty years to get 'transitional justice' - and especially justice for women survivors of war crime. How could the Syrian women prepare now to ensure that war criminals are punished when a postwar government is installed in Syria?

As you know, the number of women raped as an integral part of the ethnic aggression and displacement in the Bosnian war is huge - it may be 30,000, it may be twice that. What justice did they receive after the war? The International Criminal Tribunal for Yugoslavia was historic in defining rape as a war crime for the first time in world history. But it has tried only the most notorious cases, a tiny proportion of indictable offenders. The judicial system of Bosnia-Herzegovina was left to deal with the remainder - but only eighteen cases had so far been heard in the Bosnian court. Even those eventually convicted have served pretty short sentences. With remission, a lot of these men are already walking free again - the women they abused see them on the street.

What could be done to prevent this kind of experience in Syria, as and when the guns are silenced? The Syrian women affirmed that they're attempting to document crimes, but they say it's very difficult. How do you get death certificates, medical reports, tissue samples in the chaos of war? One woman said, 'Tissue samples? Where would we keep them - I don't even have a fridge for the food.'

But the Bosnian women kept stressing that judicial settlement isn't the only aspect of what's called 'transitional justice'. There are other things that help. For instance, official apologies count for something. Memorialization of places where atrocities were committed - that's psychologically important. Truth commissions may help understanding, healing and acceptance. And reparation, actual compensation, is vital. Payment must be made to survivors for the harms they've suffered, whether it's rendered in money or in support services, like health and social care, and free education for children. And a healthy economy - people deserve a livelihood.

OK, so far I've emphasized women's experiences and women's agency. But our focus is gender, not just women. Now we need to think about men. Where are they in these stories?

The Bosnian war was led and fought predominantly by men. One of their key strategies was the rape of other men's women. Men negotiated the peace and they dominate the postwar state. Gorana Mlinarević told us at the conference that although Bosnia is a signatory of CEDAW, its provisions aren't respected. Men hold almost all the key positions and many are getting very very rich through corruption. It's not surprising if there is more and more criminality, trafficking, enslavement of women and girls in brothels, debt bondage.

As for Syria, the women were telling us at the conference, militarization has led to ever deeper masculinization of Syrian society. Who counts in Syria is those who wield the weapons. With the reinforcement of masculine authority has come greater misogyny. Religion is more strongly emphasized - partly due to the fact that extremists have entered Syria in support of both sides in the conflict. And that means the male-dominated patriarchal family in an extreme form. There's always been polygamy in Syria, but today, more girls are being sold into early marriage - it's both as a way for families to get desperately needed cash and also supposedly to 'keep them safe'.

More and more as the conflict heightens, Syrian society is investing honour in women - it's the old story - so that men's weapon of choice for humiliating enemy men is the harassment and humiliation of 'their' women. Rape is more and more common. And it's seen as deeply stigmatizing - so women survivors are silenced. Wearing the *hijab* has become a norm - and women are penalized if they don't. One young woman told us, 'It's ever harder to go out of doors without head cover and a man.' These women present in Bosnia were strongly rejecting any hint of 'sectarianism'. They were saying 'We're just Syrian, nothing else'. Religion they said, 'is the regime's trap for us'.

If you read the news, listen to TV reports, read policy analyses, about the Syrian conflict you'll see the gender story being acted out - but what you won't often hear is the masculinism made explicit, analysed. You'll hear of women's suffering, the plight of 'women and children'. And you'll hear variants on the story of the social forces inflicting it: the Assad regime, the Free Syrian Army, the Islamic Front. But you won't hear the masculinity they embody, the militarized patriarchy, talked about, analysed. Except, in a small closed circle, by a few feminists. In popular culture there's a kind of blind-spot here.

To come back to the bigger scene - the question of UN Security Council Resolution 1325. Getting that through the UN in the year 2000 was a huge achievement by the WILPF women and their allies. It's a valuable instrument. Women all over the world are trying to use it - like the women in Syria now trying to access the Geneva talks.

But it had a definite weakness. Felicity Hill and Carol Cohn and others who were involved in steering the Resolution through the Security Council at the time are now saying that its text is too much limited to the question of women, women as victims of war, women's needs, women's strengths and potential for peace-making. What it says nothing about is men and masculinity in relation to militarism and war. Of course it was tricky, the women wanted to get their draft accepted, they didn't want to demand too much. But Carol Cohn

wondered afterwards if they should have tried harder to press the Security Council to address what she calls quote ‘the pernicious, pervasive complexities of the *gender regimes* that undergird not only individual wars but the *entire war system*’.

The fact is the United Nations is a flawed and limited institution. It’s totally hostage to the USA and global capitalism. And in the same way it’s hostage to patriarchy - it can’t make a critique of men and masculinity as perpetrators of war and war crime. Sandra Whitworth’s written about this. She says, quote ‘There’s no discussion in UN documents of militarism or militarized masculinities or, for that matter, of masculinities more generally’. Yet the Security Council was set up precisely to reduce militarization and end war.

As I mentioned earlier, when you say gender relations as we live them are among the causes of militarization and war you get a lot of sceptical or negative responses - including sometimes from women. Some think you’re being anti-man. Some think you’re being reductive, essentialist. And they’ll cite facts to contradict you: ‘look at all the women joining the military today’, ‘you even have female Ministers of Defence’.

I think it’s important to possess an argument capable of convincing such sceptics, to be able to make a case that war doesn’t just have gendered effects, gender relations are among its causes. So I tried to do this in an article in the *International Feminist Journal of Politics*. It was in 2010 I think, three or four years ago. I titled it: ‘*Gender Relations as **Causal** in Militarization and War: A Feminist Standpoint*’. I knew that word ‘causal’ was risky. I was sticking my neck out there. But I thought, and still think, it can be justified. I want to take just a moment now to spell out what I was trying to say. To be clear about it. You may agree, indeed you may think I’m stating the obvious. Or you may disagree and think I’m overstating the case. But hopefully we can talk about that in the discussion!

I want to stress that I didn’t just make this up off the top of my head. My work since 1995 has enabled me to listen with extreme care to hundreds of antimilitarist activist women. I’ve travelled more than 100,000 miles to visit and revisit around 30 women’s organizations - in twelve countries. You saw photos of some of the women in the Powerpoint that was running as we started this talk. I’ll run it again at the end. I want you to see their faces. It’s what I’ve heard these very women say that I’ve woven into what you might call ‘a theory of gender in relation to war’.

[POWERPOINT]

There are a number of steps in the argument.

Powerpoint 1 First, the women I met for the most part didn’t hesitate to call themselves feminist. And their feminism, as I understood it, is a holistic feminism. It’s wide in scope. It’s ‘**socialist**’ feminism (they can hardly avoid having a critique of capitalism as cause of war. It’s **transnational** and **anti-racist** feminism (they see that imperialism, cultural factors, ethnic hatred are at work in war. It includes what’s sometimes scorned as ‘**liberal**’ feminism

(but it has to - they have to call for human rights, justice, rule of law). It's '**radical**' feminism (it's clear enough that women's bodies, sexuality, are in play in war). It's **anti-essentialist** (they believe gender is a social artefact. The way we live masculinity and femininity can change - they're calling for that change). And their feminism involves **a concept of 'patriarchy'** (they live in it, they say. We know it.)

Powerpoint 2 It also seemed to me these women who are continually either caught up in conflict or supporting others who are - can't afford the rather lofty "international relations" perspective that diplomats and statesmen can afford. They look at the detail as they live it - so their eyes perceptions are more like those of a sociologist or anthropologist. With those eyes you see war as relations between human beings. That might seem bizarre, when it's people killing each other. But war *is* social. And with a social scientist's eye you see the messy cultural detail of armed conflict. You see, in among the big violence of the guns and the bombs, the little intimate acts of violence. You hear the conversations in the barracks. That's what enables them to detect the gender in war - the machismo, the masculine bonding, the misogyny.

I also think women, who experience violence in peacetime as well as wartime, tend to see war as part of a **continuum**. You've seen how the Bosnian women were seeing it this way - many have told me how the seeds of war were sown in pre-war Yugoslavia, how the effects of war live on long after peace is signed. War is a sequence of conditions linked together in time. It's also a spatial continuum, from the rape behind the mud hut, to a city under bombardment, to intercontinental missiles. And a continuum of scale too. I remember Colombian women writing, 'We Colombian women are tired of the many kinds of violence: sexual violence, intrafamilial, social, economic, political violence - and armed violence as its maximal expression.'

So, militarization and war seen as social relations, and seen as a continuum - I would suggest that's an approach that enables feminist antimilitarist activists more readily to see gender, a relation of power, as a thread running through the whole.

And that's where they differ from most male mainstream analysts of war, and indeed male members of mainstream peace movements. We all, yes, capitalism / economics / as a perennial cause of war. Yes, we all see nationalism, cultural and racial domination, ethnic hatreds, as a perennial cause of war. BUT - they, the mainstream, don't see gender relations as a stimulus to war. That's where feminist antimilitarists differ. How can we convince them of this gap in their theory of the causation of war?

3 The next step in the argument, I think, is to be clear that when we talk about causality, there are more than one kind of causality. I draw on the work of Paul Fogarty to suggest that it's useful to distinguish, first, immediate causes of war - and yes these are often economic: wars are fought for resources like oil, or control of markets. Secondly, there are antecedent causes of war: there might be pre-existing ethno-nationalist ambitions, cultural and religious antagonisms, and so on. But there are also what he calls '**root**

causes' or favourable conditions, and these are often cultural factors - I suggest that gender relations are best seen as just such a root cause.

So, when we say gender relations are a cause of war, we're not saying that armies fight each other *about* gender issues. Rather that gender relations are a disposing factor to war-prone societies. The way we socially shape women and men, as complementary and contrasting genders, associated with specific values; the way we prioritize masculinity and endow it with authority, with control of women; the way we build manhood around competition, pride, honour, and combativeness - all this perpetuates a military mindset, prepares societies to see war as normal, even in some sense as desirable - a fulfilment of masculinized national honour and valour.

Of course, I need to stress, you can't make the case for gender as a power relation implicated in the perpetuation of militarism and war based on what individual men and women actually do. Ayse-Gul book showed us how the Turkish education system militarizes little boys. Turkey may be an extreme case. But everywhere there's a practice of constituting boys' masculinity in a way that prepares them for dominating and violent behaviours when they grow up. Of course, it's not certain sure the culture we live in, even in Turkey, is going to capture and 'normalize' the gender performance of each and every one of us. Some of us escape, some of us don't match up, some of us actively resist gender norms. I know there've been some gay conscientious objectors in Turkey who've done just that. And therein lies some hope.

BUT, no, the case for gender relations being causal in war has to rest not on what individuals do but on the enduring patriarchal gender relation itself, which over a very long historic period has been a phallogocratic relation predicated on coercion and violence.

There are quite a lot of dimensions along which power is distributed in the 'totality' of society. One is age. Another's physical ability.

4 But as far as militarization and war are concerned it's safe to say that three dimensions of power are the most significant and influential. The first is economic power - the power inherent in accumulated wealth. The wealth of corporations, of individuals, of classes. The second is ethnic or national power embodied in community, religious and state structures. This is often, but not uniquely, white supremacy. Thus far the mainstream, male, analysts and activists follow our argument. Where we lose them is when we add the third: gender power, patriarchal power. How do we convince them that this too is causal in militarization and war?

5 I think to do this we have to use the concept of intersectionality - a fairly recent feminist invention. We've argued now for some years that we have to understand individuals as not just positioned in relation to one dimension of power - let's say being "a woman" or "a man" in a gender hierarchy. Rather, we need to see her or him as being positioned at the intersection of several power relations. A woman is a woman in an unequal gender regime, but simultaneously she's positioned in regard to unequal relations of economic

class; and of nationality, race or religion. And it's the way these various positionalities intersect, shape each other's influence on her, that determines her chances in life - her own relative power or powerlessness.

6 Then we have to take another step - and shift our eyes upwards to see that these dimensions of power that define her are themselves intersected - at the systemic level, the macro level. The power structures of economic class based on ownership of the means of production, the racializing power of ethno-nationalism expressed in community authorities and states, and the patriarchal sex/gender hierarchy - these are interlocking systems, mutually shaping.

7 They have certain similarities. They're all predicated on violence. Labourers won't work unless they're driven by hunger. **Foreigners** aren't going to send you tribute if you don't threaten coercion. And **women won't be** will not be suppressed, enslaved and commodified without force.

8 Another link between these power systems is that they emerged in parallel in the same historic era - during the late neolithic and early bronze age. Accumulated wealth, the establishment of borders, male gods, male priests, male hierarchies of rule And it's no accident that institutionalized warfare began along with these developments.

9 Together these power systems shape human social structures, institutions and relational processes. Take any one institution - take the family, say. You might think that's quintessential patriarchy. But it's an economic institution too, it transmits wealth down the generations. And it's ethnic, it is where a sense of cultural, ethnic, national identity is instilled in the young as they grow. And of course, yes, it does the job of patriarchy, shaping its boys and controlling its girls. But it's together those intersected systems of power in the family (or in any other institution - a multinational corporation, or a school system) hand down the possibilities and probabilities for each one of us as individuals and groups. No single one of them, class, race or sex, as I see it, produces its effects in the absence of the other two. That's why, when it comes to the institution of militarization, it's no different. Patriarchy is right in there with capitalism and nationalism making our societies prone to war.

So then - I want to end with what for me is a puzzle and a problem. If feminists are right in this, why isn't it part of the basic understanding of peace movements? Many, many women are active with men in mixed peace movements around the world. But they say - and they've told me this over and over again - they say, however hard we try, however often we make the case, we just can't somehow instil in our organizations, our antiwar movement, this understanding of gender. I can still see the expression of despair on the face of Maki Okado, in Japan, when she said to me, 'The men, they just don't get it'. That's one reason a lot of women leave and set up autonomous women's antimilitarist groups.

10 The deafness to our voices might not matter - except for the fact that everything we've been thinking about today, from women in Bosnia and Syria,

to theories of patriarchal power, is telling us that lasting peace depends on transforming gender relations. This idea is simply not taking root in the mainstream peace movement. Not in Britain at least. It's only feminists who are saying it.

Now I want you to tell me it's different in Turkey.