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Women working for a transition to peace: N.Ireland, Guatemala, Serbia and Cyprus

Talk for a conference of the WRDA project "Women and the Conflict: Talking about the Troubles and Planning for the Future". More than a hundred women from all over N.Ireland attended the conference, which was the culmination of a period in which they had worked together in groups, in communities both rural and urban, Catholic and Protestant, to recover the memory of the Troubles. How did women experience those years - as mothers, wives, sisters and daughters?

I'm really honoured to be here at this moment, when you're closing a period of work together, and celebrating the achievement, and thinking about next steps. I'm really impressed to hear the results from your groups, and I don't underestimate how painful it must have been sometimes to recall the past, in the way you've been doing, even when you're in good and trusted company.

I've been trying to think what I can usefully say to reflect the concerns of your project. I come from London - a place that doesn't so much experience armed conflict as export it, deliver it to other countries. I have a privileged life as a researcher and writer who can travel a lot and learn how people survive armed conflict and build peace in other countries. I thought maybe the most helpful thing I could do this afternoon is to bring you some news from other women's groups who, like you, are trying to shift a country from 'post-war' to real peace.

Every war is different of course. But women's suffering in other conflicts has a lot of the features I've heard you tell about here. Their distress like yours is as much for the ones they love as for themselves. Like yours, their memory is of maintaining everyday life in impossible conditions. One thing I notice from your reports is that you are all associated with women's centres and organizations. In other countries too I've found women believing it's important to establish a base in which they can work consciously as women, with women, building feminist perceptions about how war affects women, how it bears on relations between men and women, and what that implies for peace.

In this talk I'm going to call on the experience of three groups - one in Guatemala, one in Serbia, and one in Cyprus. Each of them has some experience that could be relevant in Northern Ireland. And I've brought photos of three individual women, among the many great women who work in these projects, so you can imagine me as a kind of 'carrier pigeon' carrying messages directly from them to you.

But before I start - I have to say that when I travel and visit and research and write about such groups, I always tell them that it was in Belfast, in 1996, that I found the most impressive work being done to help a country move from centuries of war to a prospect of peace. More than anywhere else, it was here, in the Women's Support Network in Belfast, that brought together women of the Shankill, Falls, Windsor and other women's community centres, that I learned from women about the dedication and courage you need if your aim is to further the transition to peace. And what's more the skills you need -- among them feminist skills -- to convert suspicion and fear between women of different identities, different names, different positioning in relation to the causes of an armed conflict -- into caring and careful engagement towards understanding each other and working together.

1. Guatemala

The first country I want to bring news from is Guatemala, where I know some women, like you, who are working in groups to recover historical memory. Guatemala is a small country in Central America which used to be a Spanish colony. Like N.Ireland its armed conflict ran from the 1960s until the mid-1990s. The cause of the war was exploitation and poverty. For centuries Guatemala was ruled by a few rich families. The indigenous people, Maya, who are about half of the population, had only the poorest land and were obliged to work, and die, on the big corporations' fruit plantations. Democratic attempts at change were scotched by the USA. Eventually there was a guerrilla uprising. So the long war that followed was a class war, but it was also an ethnic genocide against the Maya. And it was a gender war, a war on women. Rape was used massively by the State Army. Really rape is an understatement, in a lot of cases it was extreme sexual torture and murder. The aim was punishment, to demoralize the communities that supported the insurgency.

Guatemala's peace agreement was signed in 1996 - just two years before the Good Friday agreement here. But of course a ceasefire and the signing of an agreement don't actually make peace, as you know only too well. They stop the worst of the violence and bring a feeling of hope. It's a step on a possible *transition* to peace. Guatemala's next step was a commission, organized by the Catholic Church - a kind of 'truth and reconciliation commission'. (I know there's been talk of such a thing here.) Just how unsteady the peace was, is shown by the fact that the Bishop who presented the report to the public was assassinated the following day.

I have a very dear friend, Yolanda Aguilar. (PHOTO) As a teenage girl in Guatemala at a certain point in the war she survived some very terrible things and then after years of struggle and exile she became the woman who wrote, for that report, the chapter that described what had happened to women during the war. It revealed, through women's testimonies, extremes of sexual violence. But Yolanda and other feminists in Guatemala believe that for a handful of women to speak out isn't enough. All women need the chance to

talk about what happened to them, if they're to play a part in the transition to peace.

So she and Luz Mendez and other women formed an organization and started a project they called 'from victims of sexual violence to actors for change' or, for short, *Actoras de Cambio*. The project became a team of around 20 women, with psychology and counselling and research skills, who went out into three regions of the country and began to locate women who had been raped, who had never spoken about it, and who wanted to recover the memory now, and find a voice. The reason for women's silence all those years is that, as happens almost everywhere in the world, the victims of rape in Guatemala are punished not just by the rapist, but by their own menfolk and community. It's always better not to tell. Your husband may leave you, your community may despise you. In Actoras de Cambio gradually women came forward and small groups rather like yours were formed, and they began the work of recovering the memory and healing the pain.

Now, several years later, these women have a difficult decision to make. Are they going to look for what's sometimes called 'transitional justice'? The government is talking about 'reparations' for war crimes. Should the rape survivors ask to be included? What would it serve them - they might get a cheque, money, and what would that say, exactly? One rape is worth so many dollars or quetzales? It might feel like being bought. Re-victimized.
I was with Yolanda last Sunday. She was in London. As we sat talking I described your project to Yolanda and asked her what I should tell you, what news from Guatemala should I bring to you, what message would she like to send? She thought about it a bit and said:

I'd like to tell them that the process they've begun is very very important - to recover historical memory, to remind yourself what happened, to tell someone else, to know that they know. Without it, we can't liberate our energies for peace and reconstruction. But she believes it takes more than just telling, that we have to go through a process of bodily and spiritual healing if we're to move forward. Why the body? I asked her. She said, 'Before we were Maya or Catholic or Protestant, we were people. The pain we experienced in the past and we describe to each other now is built into our bodies. Our bodies carry the memory, they are a record of the conflict. (And you know this, I've seen how often in your stories you connect terrible events to illness.) You can't build peace on top of pain. We have to heal ourselves in order to leave it behind. To work at healing your own body and heart and spirit (Yolanda says) isn't the big ambitious scheme it sounds, it's actually quite humble work. Each of us can do something of that kind alone. But together we can do more - through touch -- learning to express emotions of fear, anger, tenderness through the contact of our hands, finding other ways than words. Yolanda's going back to Guatemala soon, and while *Actoras de Cambio* continues its work in the regions, she's going to set up a feminist resource, a centre for bodily and spiritual healing.

What the work of these women in Guatemala is about, in the end, Yolanda says, is *cultural transformation*. The point and purpose of the process of

recovering memory, speaking about pain, working to heal body and mind and becoming active, women gaining agency, is to transform the cultures we live in, in such a way that they won‘t any longer predispose to further war. Because the terrible truth that lies in so-called ‘post-war moments’ or ‘transitional moments’, is that war is never really over. If we're honest with ourselves, war is a continuum. Wars meant to end war, don't. They afford moments of demilitarization and demobilization maybe, but violence can shift from militarist violence to civil violence and back again so easily. (I've seen this in Helen's report, the things that you say are ‘worse’ today than in the Troubles include violence associated with criminality.) And violent criminality is insecurity. It prepares a new generation for armed conflict.

Certainly, Guatemala isn't at peace. Hate-filled, repressive forces live on inside the apparently-reformed state and its security services. Communities are controlled by gangs, their currency is drugs and women. They operate protection rackets. Sometimes it seems that every man has a gun. There’s an epidemic of femicide: on average two women a week in the capital city are found raped, sexually mutilated, murdered and thrown in a ditch. Six or seven hundred a year. There’s total impunity -- these crimes are never prosecuted. The judiciary is either corrupt or afraid. The women who organise Actoras de Cambio are continually threatened by menacing phone calls, male voices late at night that say ‘if you don't stop work with these whores, you too will become raped women. Is that what you want?’

This is the culture that has to be transformed if peace is to come and to stay. What Guatemalan women are absolutely clear about is that gender has a lot to do with war. Men and masculinities are vehicles of terror, today as they were in the armed conflict. It's men with guns who control every community, including the rural communities where, due to the work of *Actoras de Cambio*, through working together, women are beginning to find the confidence, to speak for the first time about the rapes that happened to them.

Recently some of the women’s groups have started to turn their attention to men. Amandine, one of the project workers, was asked by the women to go and have a meeting with a group of men in their community. The men at the meeting were the social leaders of that community. They were activists, actually, defending the idea of ‘human rights’. They’d been calling publicly for a declaration by the Guatemalan government, they wanted the government to acknowledge that the war had been a war of genocide against the indigenous people. Hearing Amandine talk about the rape of women in their community during the war, these men were shocked. They said they’d never thought of rape as a human rights violation. The following week they called a village assembly and acknowledged that they had never faced up to what had happened to their women. Their own deafness, their reluctance to know, was the ‘other side of the coin’ of women's silence. Now they’re including rape as part of the genocide their community is challenging the government about.

Actually, there’s an even more difficult issue in Guatemala that the women are only now beginning to address. It is the question of ‘sides’, and I guess that is pretty familiar to you. While most rapes were by the ‘enemy’, the Army, some

women were raped by men of their own side. The guerrillas sometimes raped and abused women, they subjected female fighters and local women in the villages where they camped into forced liaisons. Some of the perpetrators of these rapes are still living in the villages where the women live today. Addressing this now, as you can imagine, raises terrible issues of guilt and responsibility.

2. Serbia

These two words are very important in the thinking of the second group I want to talk about – Women in Black in Belgrade, Serbia. This Stasa Zajovic, their coordinator, (PHOTO). She often travels and gives talks. I'm pretty sure she's been to N.ireland, so some of you may know her.

Serbia was the dominant republic within the Federation of Yugoslavia, the one that started the destruction of the state through its leaders' ambition of domination and ethnic purity. This was in the late 80s. Some women here saw one thing clearly: this nationalist extremism, militarization and the resurgence of a politicised Orthodox Christian Church were very bad news for women. They were bringing back with them a deep old repressive patriarchy that hadn't been known in Yugoslavia for half a century: women were being pushed back to their traditional roles, to outbreed the 'enemy' (Muslims) and support their soldier-hero men. So throughout the war these women in Belgrade felt driven to declare themselves traitors to church and state, on all fronts. I remember an article by Stasa that she titled 'I am disloyal'. The women demonstrated publicly in the central square throughout the war, and still to this day, against nationalism, militarism and patriarchy.

But what's more relevant for you, is that I visited Belgrade a few years ago to attend a workshop they were running that brought together Serb women and Bosnian Muslim women (the ethnic groups the war had made each others' enemy). And I had a chance to see at first hand the work they'd been doing, since the war ended, to rebuild contact and trust between the two communities. It's been very, very careful and caring work. And here is an example of how their step by step work across extremely painful divisions has borne fruit. Do you remember the terrible massacre in Srebrenica in 1995 when Serb forces killed perhaps 10,000 Bosnian Muslims? Well now, so strong is the trust these women have in each other, they can go *together* on the anniversary to commemorate and mourn the massacre. That is - women of the victim group (Bosnian Muslim women) and women of the perpetrator group (Serb women in whose name the massacre was carried out) side by side. You, of all women, in Northern Ireland, can imagine what that means and what it took to get there!

So, clearly, Women In Black have had to do a lot of thinking about difference between guilt and responsibility. They are emphatically opposed to the idea of collective guilt. They don't blame 'them', the other. Nor do they accept guilt just for bearing a particular name – like being 'a Serb'. They say: there are actual criminals who are really guilty - guilty of war crimes, of murders and rapes – and we must work to see them brought to trial, prosecuted and

punished. On the other hand, it's true that crimes were done 'in our name', so there's no avoiding that we have to question ourselves honestly. Ask ourselves, what did we do about it at the time? What are we going to do about it now? In other words we do have to take *responsibility* -- and somehow overcome our shame towards the 'other', the enemy other, and transform it into care. The Serbian women have for years now been trying to develop a political practice they call 'caring for self and for the other equally', as part of the transition to peace.

Given this, it's perhaps not surprising that a couple of months ago Stasa and other women invited Yolanda (from Guatemala) to come to Belgrade and run a three-day workshop on bodily and spiritual healing for women in their project, women struggling between responsibility and guilt in post-war Serbia. But these connections do still seem wonderful to me. For instance, how did I meet Yolanda? I met her because two or three years ago a friend in a women's cross-community project in Israel / Palestine spoke of her so warmly that I felt I must meet her. This is how the circles of feminist care and solidarity are working in the world. Within a little while, if you haven't already done so, someone in this room is going to carry the message of the work you're doing, and are going to be doing, to women in other war zones. Because the transition to peace is a global project, one that women are central to - and we're more and more connected.

3. Cyprus

Women from Northern Ireland were involved in the foundation of the next women's group I want to talk about which is in Cyprus. Here's another unfinished armed conflict, and another group of women trying to effect a transition to peace. They're called *Hands Across The Divide*. There are certain similarities between the conflict and partition in Cyprus and the conflict and separation in Ireland. Cyprus was a British colony too. The Greek-speaking majority led the armed struggle for independence. The British government used the Turkish minority as policemen to control the insurgency. When independence was achieved in 1960 it wasn't long before violence broke out between the two ethnic groups, with the Greeks now dominating and driving Turkish Cypriots into enclaves. There was a fascist coup by Greek militarists in 1974. Immediately Turkey invaded, and drove Greek Cypriots south and staked a claim to the northern third of the island as a kind of Turkish Cypriot mini-state. A barbed wire partition line followed. It's been there ever since, patrolled by the United Nations. There was displacement and distress on both sides, a huge sense of grievance still remains. Recently, the Line's been opened at two or three 'checkpoints' so that people have more freedom to move and to meet each other again. But the politicians still won't sign up to a peace agreement.

How the Cypriot women's group came into existence was like this. In the year 2001, when the partition line was still completely closed, a Greek Cypriot woman and a Turkish Cypriot woman made contact with each other. They planned to ask the British Embassy in Nicosia to help them do an impossible

thing - organize a two-day meeting for women, one day in the South followed by one day in the North, with half the participants going through the checkpoint to cross the Green Line each day so that everyone could attend all the conference. They asked me to facilitate the conference. We decided to invite some women from other countries to help us address the problems of negotiating political borders. Among them were Mamo McDonald of the Older Women's Network in Monaghan - and Una Walsh of the Mullaghbawn Community Centre in South Armagh, who's here today. Connections again! The Nicosia meeting was very successful and it led to the formation of this organisation called: Hands Across The Divide. I worked with them as a member and as a researcher for two years.

Well - in connection with coming here today, I was thinking about Hands Across The Divide, and what they might want to contribute to this meeting if they had the chance to be here. They too are trying to act together as women, to think gender, and make some contribution to the kind of reconnection between Turkish Cypriot and Greek Cypriot that might change minds in Cyprus and encourage the population, next time the opportunity comes around, to vote for a peace agreement. I was with them again for a couple of weeks this April and went along with them on a 'peace bus' trip, which is one of their current projects. We were a group of women, Turkish Cypriot and Greek Cypriot, travelling together by bus to three villages (on this occasion in the South, next time in the North) where we met local women and exchanged ideas and planted a small olive tree to symbolise our common hopes for peace.

Now, Hands Across The Divide has been extraordinary, in fact they're totally unique in Cyprus, as a women's group capable of taking joint action (Turkish and Greek Cypriot women together), if necessary on the street, towards a transition to peace. But, I know they would agree, if I say that their effectiveness has been less than it might have been if their circumstances had been different. The barrier of the Green Line meant they couldn't meet face-to-face as a group and communication between them was mainly by e-mail. They were never able to do what you here in this project have been able to do, in a way have had the luxury to do – that is, to meet often enough, and long enough, to share histories and heal some pain at the very beginning. The cost was that for quite a long while at the start they sometimes misunderstood each other, or didn't trust each other – they'd say 'you don't understand how it's been for us', 'you don't understand where we're coming from'. That's why projects like yours are so important.

But one way the group has been important is in giving cross-community support to the activism of some individual members. For instance, one of the founding members of the group, Sevgul Uludag (PHOTO) is an very brave and highly professional journalist, who works in a Turkish-language newspaper, *Yeniduzen*. She's been making an extraordinary contribution to the 'recovery of historical memory' on both sides of the Line, single-handed. She's been travelling around the North and the South of the island, finding and talking with, listening to, people who have missing relatives, individuals who 'disappeared' without trace during the armed conflict. Day by day in her

newspaper column, which is also translated into Greek and published in the south, Sevgul is telling their stories. Where people know the perpetrators, she names them. Where people believe there are burial sites hiding war crimes, she's calling for them to be excavated. This is dangerous work. I worry for her safety, as I do for the women of *Actoras to Cambio* in Guatemala. And for Stasa and the women of Women in Black in Serbia. A recent election there showed that the extreme right, the nationalists who caused the war, are within a whisker of having a majority of voters in the country. Women's feminist politics isn't 'outside of' real politics. It's part of it. It isn't play, and it isn't seen by 'real politicians' as play. Men hit back. It's part of the war. Not many women have anything to gain from perpetuating armed conflict. But some men do. Women spoil their game.

Sevgul has gathered together some of the stories of the 'disappeared' into a book 'The Oysters With The Missing Pearls'. But, not just content with writing, she's taking the book around the island, organising small gatherings of readers in different towns and villages. Wherever she goes she tries to take with her, as speakers, one of the Greek Cypriot and one of the Turkish Cypriot, women with missing relatives, to encourage their audience to tell about their own experiences, and open up new possibilities for the truth to come out.

So here we are with guilt and responsibility again. Sevgul is saying, just as the Serbian and Bosnian women are saying, 'we don't believe in collective guilt', we believe in individual crimes and criminals. If we take responsibility for insisting on the naming and punishment of those who perpetrated crimes, and not only against us but also against others in our name, there is a chance that we, you and I, and our communities, can live together again.

Out of these years of research among women in war zones I've learned something about the causes of war. There are several motors of war, several forces that drive war along, that prevent peace from taking root. One is economics, obviously. Capitalism, gross disparities of wealth and poverty. We heard about that in Guatemala. Another cause of war is extremist ideas about ethnicity, national identity and religion manipulated by ambitious leaders - as in Serbia, and Cyprus. But there's another driving force, another motor of war that most people overlook. And it's visible in all these wars – it's *gender relations*. What goes on between men and women in our societies. It's not just by chance that all these groups meet as women, that they are feminist projects. They have no doubt at all that gender is connected with war. The way we live gender, as patriarchy, as a relation of inequality, and even of domination by one sex over the other, tends to shape men and masculinity in a particular way - as aggressive, combative, and misogynist. Disrespectful of women and the values of everyday life. But it's not just men. Women too are caught up in these patriarchal gender relations. Lots of women are activists for peace - but we're not natural peacemakers. Too often we bring up our children so that as adults they reproduce the entrenched patterns of the past. We defend our men whatever they do. And sometimes we ourselves join the war mongering, and even sometimes the carnage. I could tell you some horror stories about women, but I'm sure you have enough of your own.

Transforming the way we live gender, transforming our masculinities and femininities so that they don't any longer perpetuate violence between wars, so they don't any longer predispose our countries to war, this is part of the cultural transformation that Yolanda speaks about so longingly in Guatemala. It's what women in El Salvador, Brazil, the DR Congo and Liberia are trying to achieve when they struggle with men over the collection of guns, when they call for gun-free elections, and gun-free homes. A lot of them come up against men's anger for this.

It is very very difficult, isn't it, in time of war for women to separate themselves from 'men' (in quotes), even for a moment, long enough to step back and examine the gender problem, the problem of patriarchal culture and violence. Because there are actual men in our lives, the men *not* in quote marks, the real ones, our sons, our partners and our fathers and brothers. We love them and our main feeling is fear *for* them, not fear *of* them. At such times it's difficult to see how we can ever criticise some kinds of masculinity without seeming to condemn all men. We know and say that the patriarchal script is not carved in stone, and that some men evade it, or even re-write it. We know and say that men themselves suffer terribly from a system in which war is seen as a fulfilment of manhood – not the exploitation of it that it really is. Yet if we say masculinity, a certain kind of masculinity, is a problem, they think we must be 'man-haters'. But there does come a time, I think, when it's possible to recognize that gender, and particularly masculinity as we know it, is a factor in war.

A few years ago in Cyprus there were hopes of a peace agreement. They were discussing what was called the Annan Plan. The plan proposed to create quote 'a new state of affairs on the island'. The position of Hands Across The Divide at that moment was to say, great - look, what's intended in this peace plan is a transformed ethnic relationship. That's to say relations between Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots are going to become *equal, respectful, communicative and non-violent.* We women want to put forward a thought never expressed by the teams of politicians negotiating peace (all of them men): couldn't we at this self-same moment, when change is in the air for ethnic relations, call for 'a new state of affairs' in gender relations too? Couldn't we expect that relations between women and men in a future Cyprus might also differ from the past, using these very same terms? Haven't we a right to expect that our relations as women and men are every bit as *equal, respectful, communicative and non-violent* as relations between Turkish and Greek Cypriots, hopefully, are going to be? The women came up with some good concrete examples of what kind of change in gender relations might go hand-in-hand with demilitarization and demobilization. At this moment they're gearing up to make this kind of intervention in a new peace process promised for this summer.

When I was with them recently I mentioned the important contribution women had made in Northern Ireland, after the Good Friday agreement. It was you women who, along with other organisations of civil society, made sure that the peace was spelt out using the word 'fair'. I told them how you wanted to be

certain that a future post-conflict society would enshrine not just a cessation of violence, but a principle of equality, of '*fairness*' on every dimension. Of course, yes, 'fair deals' at last for Catholics and Protestants, Republicans or Unionists; BUT 'fair deals' too for women in relation to men; and others that history had trodden down. *Cultural transformation* - the process that I think you're part of. Now I'm back in Northern Ireland ten years after the peace agreement, I'd like you to tell me how it's going! Is the transition from conflict to peace here embodying a new deal between women and men? Are women being taken more seriously – in politics, in the community, in the home? Is there a new, disarmed, co-operative masculinity on the horizon?