Conference Report: Upholding Gendered Peace at a Time of War

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June 2015

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Conference Report  
_Upholding Gendered Peace at a Time of War_  
Beirut, 8-11 June 2015  
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The conference was organized by the Institute for Women’s Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW), which has long been a key unit of the Lebanese American University, and the Paris-based feminist think tank, Women in War, founded by Dr. Carol Mann. Sponsors were the Danish donor agency KVINFO, Germany’s Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, and l’Organisation international de la francophonie. The key issues addressed pertained to the record of the Arab Spring thus far; the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa region; and women’s roles in religious extremism, conflicts, peace-building, and political leadership. There were two keynote addresses (by Dr. Nawal el-Saadawi of Egypt and by myself) and a total of eleven panels; speakers included university professors, junior researchers, and Kurdish activists, all of which ensured a rich and lively set of discussions. A visit to Beit al-Hanan (“The House of Tenderness”) introduced participants to Lebanon’s first shelter for women victims of violence; the shelter was founded by Dr. Evelyne Accad (professor emerita of French, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign) and her sister Jacqueline Hajjar.

This report cannot describe every presentation in detail. Instead, it highlights the key issues discussed and debated and summarizes presentations that I found especially compelling. Because the conference concluded with a call for policy recommendations, my report ends with what I found to be some common themes and some policy directions that could be considered by the conference organizers and participants.

The conference began with Nawal Saadawi’s talk on “women, war, and revolution.” She made reference to "many forms of war", including economic war, the tragic migrations of peoples, epidemics, the trafficking of women, and the “new form of colonialism” that has adversely affected the Arab Spring – all evidence of "an inhumane world". Saadawi drew attention to the “very destructive role” played in the region by the Western powers, which she claimed were responsible for both al-Qaeda and ISIS. She also wondered why there was so much hand-wringing about Iran’s nuclear capacity when it is common knowledge that Israel possesses nuclear weapons. Why the double standard, she asked? And why is there is no talk of a nuclear-free region? Indeed. Saadawi also reminded participants that the Arab Women’s Solidarity Association, which she had founded, had been shut down by the Mubarak regime for having opposed the first Gulf War. Her wide-ranging talk touched on circumcision (male and female alike), religion and fear, the criminal nature of war, why the region is called “the Middle East”, the Americanization and Islamization of Egypt, the “aborting of the Egyptian revolution”, and the need for “global solidarity”.


Subsequent panels were on gender and armed conflict; women, war, and displacement; the many faces of religious extremism; the many facets and faces of fundamentalisms; the decentering of the intimate sphere; female fighters during armed conflicts; displacement through occupation or exile; sexual violence in conflict; cyberactivism and journalism; creativity in times of conflict; legal accountability, and international instruments, and peacebuilding. There was also a screening of the documentary film “Mission Rape: A Tool of War”, introduced by Dr. Connie Christiansen of Roskilde University, Denmark, and KVINFO. Simultaneous interpretation in English, French, and Arabic enabled all participants to understand each other, and there was ample time for Q&A, challenges from the floor after each panel, and discussions over coffee breaks, lunch and dinner.

Key Issues and Debates

- The Arab Spring: why Tunisia has done best thus far, and whether or not the Arab Spring (or its presumed “revolutions”) continues. In my keynote, I considered two sets of cases – Tunisia, Egypt, and Morocco compared with Bahrain, Libya, Syria, and Yemen – to explain the divergent outcomes. I emphasized the salience of pre-existing gender relations and women’s mobilizations, along with military spending and international connections. My discussion of the relatively successful case of Tunisia compared with Egypt’s regression generated a lively debate, especially from the Egyptian participants.
- Young women from France and Tunisia who join ISIS: an interesting difference in analysis was provided by Dr. Armelle Le Bras-Chopard (University of Versailles, France), on the one hand, and the Tunisian participants Dr. Ikbal al-Gharbi (Zeytouna University, Tunis), Dr. Najet Limam-Tnani (University of Tunis), and Dr. Khedija Arfaoui (University of Tunis and the feminist organizations AFTURD and Femmes Démocrates), on the other. Whereas Armelle emphasized the humanitarian, altruistic, and ideological motives and commitments of the “jihadi brides”, the Tunisian speakers stressed the indignities of the serial marriages, or as Ikbal put it, “prostitution sacralisée”. The different emphases underscored the persistence of the agency-structure tension in social-science analyses.
- Lebanese women’s invisibility in politics. The session on women, war and displacement in Lebanon underscored the problems of Lebanon’s continuing “patriarchal-feudal” political system, as described by Tracy Chamoun, a member of a political family touched by assassinations who is currently a candidate for parliament and the presidency. Lebanon’s relations with refugees have always been fraught, and this too may have affected women’s political participation. Adriana Qubaia’s presentation on the gendered narratives of rape and reproduction regarding Syrian women refugees – which, she argued, oscillate between seeing women as victims of rape and women as agents with high fertility – was a reminder of the persistence of local perceptions of security threats that impede socio-political change.
- The status of the Kurdish struggles for national and gender liberation in Rojava and elsewhere: this came about with a fascinating presentation by Meral Cicek, co-founder of the Kurdish Women’s Relations Office (REPAK) in northern Iraq. Following the internal
transformation of the Kurdish People’s Party (PKK), the goal now is not necessarily a Kurdish state but the broader goal of liberation and emancipation, along with democratic practices in self-governing. Rojava, a *de facto* autonomous region in northern Syria consisting of three self-governing cantons with male and female co-presidents, has been leading the fight against ISIS/ISIL, not least on the part of the YPG, or the People’s Protection Units, which include women fighters.

- The strengths and weaknesses of international law and the inconsistency of its application: examples are the Palestine-Israel conflict and especially the summer 2014 Israeli attacks on Gaza; the absence of gender justice for women victims of sexual violence (the Bosnian war, eastern Congo, Egypt); and impunity of perpetrators of wars, occupations, invasions, and bombardments in Iraq 2003 (US and UK), Libya 2011 (NATO and its regional allies), Syria 2011 and since (the Western powers and their regional allies), and Yemen today (Saudi Arabia). As Rabab Abdulhadi asserted in response to my question about how political bias trumps the presumed neutrality and objectivity of international law, “there is no objectivity in international law; we choose when to apply it and when to ignore it.” Given the nature of our interstate system, this reality would apply even in cases where non-governmental or civil society organizations take the lead on pushing for accountability and prosecution.

The session on religious extremism included a presentation by Dr. Ilham Hammadi of Lebanon on the plight of Yazidi women and the ISIS practice of slavery. For ISIS, slavery is not contrary to sharia law because Yazidis are considered not people of the Book, and because ISIS believes that it is fighting a holy war. While the men should convert or be killed, the women can be taken as sexual slaves; virgins command a higher price than non-virgins. One 17-year old was "married" – forcibly, of course – to four different men, serially. The men who take advantage of these women are mostly Iraqis from Mosul. (There is thus similarity between the rape of Bosnian women at the hands of local Serb male fighters, and the rape of Yazidi women at the hands of local Iraqi Sunni male fighters.) In a subsequent presentation, Dr. Nahla al Nadawi of the University of Baghdad displayed copies of original documents by ISIS with directives on the permissibility of sexual slavery. It was quite jarring to see “official” documents on such an atrocious practice.

Nermina Trbonja discussed militarized masculinities in Bosnia-Herzegovina (B-H), a small country with “low religious literacy”, a free-market economy, and patriarchal values. She showed slides of Muslim Bosnian men of Wahhabi/Salafi tendency, who prepare themselves in Bosnian training camps for the “jihad” in Syria. Christian men also fight, on opposite side of the Ukrainian conflict: Catholic Croats support Kiev while Orthodox Serbs fight with the pro-Russian forces in the east. What was disturbing were the slides of Croatian neo-Nazis fighting with the forces in Kiev, complete with swastika flags! Other Bosnian men join the US forces stationed in B-H. Trbonja asserted that such militarized masculinity is the legacy of the Yugoslav era and the Yugoslav People’s Army – although surely the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s reinforced an especially pernicious form of such masculinity.
Khalida Nurmetova discussed Chechnya and its current boss, Ramazan Kadirov, the son of the assassinated former president who is an ally of President Putin. Chechnya was once the site of a vicious conflict pitting violent Islamists against the Russian state. The state fought hard to repress the uprising and maintain stability, but Nurmetova argued that Moscow's "security above all" strategy has been carried out on the backs of women's rights. Kadirov has allowed the reintroduction of polygamy, underage marriage, and forced marriage, practices that are banned in the Russian Federation's constitution and laws. That the Kremlin had turned a blind eye to these practices for the sake of security, she argued, not only cements women's subordination but could weaken Russian unity and secularism.

Katherine van den Boger, a Ph.D. student in Utrecht, discussed “blood, bodies, and violence: women's bodily experiences and symbolic meanings in the Egyptian Arab Spring”, which touched on the differential treatment of female and male martyrs; the sexual violence in Tahrir Square; and of the self-depiction of her naked body by an Egyptian FEMEN member, now in Sweden. In January 2011, after her death, Sally Zahran was initially included among the photos of martyrs, then photo-shopped with a headscarf, and then erased from the gallery of martyrs. Can a woman not be a martyr, Katherine asked? In the Q&A, and in response to my question about the more recent case of woman martyr Shaima al-Sabbagh, Susan Galan of Rutgers University noted the change since 2011, and the public recognition of Shaima’s martyrdom.

As part of the panel on cyberactivism and journalism, Aline Sara discussed various on-line campaigns that were also off-line: the Amina Filali case in Morocco, which resulted in the Moroccan parliament repeal of the penal code article allowing a rapist to marry his victim; and in Iran, the campaigns against the acid attacks in Isfahan, along with a defiant on-line display of photos of unveiled Iranian women. The downside, she noted, was the presence of conservative websites such as one in the UAE that warns women to observe the dress code; she also mentioned digital repression in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia.

One might conclude by noting that *Upholding Gendered Peace at a Time of War* was informed by two sets of issues. One was the chaos in the region and the effects of the conflicts, including invasions and armed jihadism, on the region's stability, nicely encapsulated by Myriem Sfeir of IWSAW at the conference’s opening. As my report shows, many presentations were centered on this issue. The other was what I have termed “feminist humanitarianism”, seen in the work of Carol Mann, the founder of Women in War (based in Paris and Sarajevo), whose previous feminist charity FemAid built a school in Afghanistan; Evelyn Accad and her sister Jacqueline Hajjar, who run Beit al-Hanan; and Margaret Owen of Widows for Peace (UK), who has worked on and in Bosnia and now in Rojava. In contrast to the “liberal humanitarianism” of the likes of Tony Blair, Samantha Power, and others who advocate military intervention and thus the
reinforcement of an unequal and unjust interstate system, feminist humanitarian work is guided by principles of solidarity, equality, rights, and social/gender justice.  

Conclusions: Common Themes and Recommendations

Women, war and the international system. The logics of war are profit and power, and the perpetrators are states and non-state actors. The inequalities and double standards inherent in the international system and the global circulation of arms by states and non-state actors lie behind the persistence of war and the sexual violence that occurs. For these and other reasons, SCR 1325 cannot be implemented and other aspects of international law remain ineffective. What is needed is a reallocation of military spending toward economic development, social rights, and mechanisms to ensure women's political representation at local, national, regional, and international decision-making bodies, including courts. States and non-state actors responsible for invasions, massacres, human rights violations, and sexualized violence must be held accountable and the perpetrators brought to justice.

Religious extremism and the contemporary problem of jihadism. Contemporary forms of religious extremism and especially self-defined jihadist groups are categorically rejected. MENA women activists see jihadism as a violation of the peaceful, egalitarian, and emancipatory spirit of Islam, and women's roles in jihadist networks are a misguided and false sense of agency. Not only does participation in jihadist groups compromise the dignity and life of the participant but it also contributes to the degradation and murder of other women. Funders of jihadist groups and the combatants themselves must be held accountable for their actions. There also should be concerted educational programs and media campaigns to raise awareness of the dangers, risks, and criminality of jihadism and similar forms of extremist violence motivated by religious hatred.

Women and peacebuilding. Although the international community has recognized women's vital roles in peacebuilding, the relevant international laws have generally been ineffective, or they have not been implemented. UN Women should take the lead in monitoring and reporting on implementation of SCR 1325, 1820, etc., in concert with women's rights groups and researchers on the ground. The progressive elements within the international community should recognize and support the values and actions of feminist humanitarianism, whose work with refugees is intended to bridge the gap between basic needs and basic rights; of scholar-activists engaged in participatory action research; of transnational feminist networks opposed to militarism and war; and of local women's rights groups dedicated to peacebuilding, gender

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1 I have discussed this further in “Transnational Feminism and Movement-building,” ch. 2 in Rawwida Baksh and Wendy Harcourt (eds.), The Oxford Handbook of Transnational Feminist Movements (Oxford University Press, 2015).
justice, and reconstruction. Still, it must be acknowledged that women’s roles cannot be realized in the context of the prolongation of war and the inability of the international community to create conditions and institutions for the prevention of war.

*Ending war and preventing civil conflict.* The purchase and sale of arms, whether by states or non-state actors, creates the conditions for war while also diverting resources from poverty alleviation, economic development, the social rights of citizens, and women’s equality. Stockpiling of weapons are either used for wars or circulated clandestinely. There should be significant reductions in military spending. It is also time for a nuclear-free Middle East, in which no country - including Israel, Iran, and Saudi Arabia - should be allowed to possess nuclear weapons. Reductions in military spending will make possible advances in the lives of citizens, through the creation of decent jobs with decent wages, robust support for entrepreneurship, measures to enhance women’s political participation and representation, and an emphasis on improved relations between government and citizens.