

THE SOFT POWER OF MOTHERS

HOW WOMEN CAN PAVE THE WAY FOR
PEACE IN INTERNATIONAL CONFLICTS

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How women can pave the way for peace in international conflicts



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Introduction – “Love conquers all”

“War does not have a woman’s face” wrote Nobel Prize winner Svetlana Alexievich as she documented the brave women who had to ditch their dreams of a beautiful life to take up arms against the nazi invader¹.

Riding with Conquest, Famine and Death, the horseman of War is probably the ugliest of human features. In spite of all the modern attempt to codify the fights, the violence unleashed by wars tears down all veils of human restraint and civilization. Destruction, suffering, ruin and despair: the price of war is always paid twice by those who aspire to peace.

While women may happen to wage wars, in defence of their land and country or serving in their national armed forces, they are still always the universal victims of the conflicts. And more horrific even, some wars might sometimes be waged on women and girls precisely, like in contemporary Afghanistan².

As unarmed civilians left to face the advance of the enemy, women and young girls may have to face the brutality of the conqueror, especially when it completely disregards the international conventions and the respect for human rights and dignity. As non-combatants, they also have to protect, reassure and provide for the children, the elders and tend to the needs of the community while its valid members have gone to fight. As wives and mothers, they live in the anxiety for the lives of their husbands, brothers and sons, called under the standards.

But because of these outstanding roles in the back-lines, because of their critical function in the survival of the community, because of their unique perspective on the situation, women have also an immense power to stop wars. Their political mobilization, especially as mothers, can have a decisive impact in bringing a ceasefire, and even peace – particularly but not exclusively in civil conflicts.

From Northern Ireland to Colombia to Liberia, examples of their soft power are numerous. Mothers do not start wars. They have no say in it. And their protests are always silenced by the warmongers. Worse, their ordeal may sometimes be instrumentalised to justify the warring factions. Moreover, women almost never have a voice in the peace process either, whereas studies show exactly how crucial their involvement can be to establish a lasting and sustainable peace process.

Indeed, women in leadership roles does significantly reduce the potential violence in conflict resolution, whether civil or international – the Council on Foreign Relations offers a very thorough review of concrete examples to sustain this statement³. Additionally, more than a few scientific studies have demonstrated that countries with greater gender equality are more likely to resolve conflicts without violence and are less likely to use military force to resolve international disputes⁴. Compelling evidence that, amongst other, led to the adoption the UN

¹ Svetlana Alexievich, *The unwomanly face of war*, 2017 (1983) Random House

² <https://www.icj.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/The-Talibans-war-on-women-the-crime-against-humanity-of-gender-persecution-in-Afghanistan-FINAL-VERSION.pdf>

³ <https://www.cfr.org/womens-participation-in-peace-processes/>

⁴ See Catalina Crespo-Sancho <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/dev4peace/can-gender-equality-prevent-violent-conflict>

Resolution 1325 in October 2000, urging “Member States to ensure increased representation of women at all decision-making levels in national, regional and international institutions and mechanisms for the prevention, management, and resolution of conflict.”⁵

How can women and mothers bring peace? This was the central question that the IED addressed in its “Soft Power of Mothers” seminar on 25 January 2025⁶. What role should they have in peace-making? What lessons can be learned from the feminist civil society movements? How can their experience bring a valuable contribution to peace in today’s world? Can “the soft power of mothers” counterbalance the sheer brutality of a global stage rife with geopolitical conflicts?

*It's time that women took a stand and got together. We are 50% of the world and we have the power to make a difference*⁷.

As the EU is confronted, sometimes powerless, to a new explosion of violence in its neighbourhood, it is worth reflecting of the soft power that can be wielded by feminist activists and mothers’ organisation. In the words of **Marina Demetriou**, who introduced the discussion on behalf of the IED, in these times ridden with war, conflict and unrest, it is of primordial importance *to not cede to fear and encourage every movement towards love and positively contributing to the world, to humanity* – if one is hoping for peace.

In the turmoil of the war engulfing so many parts of the world, from Ukraine to the Middle-East, from Sahel to Sudan, from the Great Lakes to Yemen, and various other foyers of tension, either civil or international⁸... it is hard not to *think about the civilian populations, the mothers of the soldiers, the mothers who lost children, the mothers of sick children with no hospitals, no heating, the mothers who were looking for their missing children asking the world to bring them home.*

“Love in politics”. The plea sounds utterly ambitious and strangely at odds with the nature of both. Particularly so, in our Trumpian, Schmittian times of polarisation and conflict⁹, as the calls are increasingly more about realism, rearmament¹⁰, including a disturbing “demographic” one¹¹, defending borders and fending off the enemy. Turning politics on its head is an endeavour that requires a lot of courage, creativity and dedication – and a radically different approach to the world, the planet and ourselves¹².

How different would the world be if women in general and mothers in particular were

⁵ <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/wps/>

⁶ Complete list of participants to be found in Annexes

⁷ All parts in *cursive* are direct quote from the discussion. Unless specified, they will remain unattributed for confidentiality purposes.

⁸ See the Council on Foreign Relations’ map <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker>

⁹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/26/opinion/trump-maga-schmitt.html>

¹⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/may/25/poland-foreign-minister-radoslaw-sikorski-long-term-rearmament-europe>

¹¹ https://www.lemonde.fr/en/france/article/2024/01/17/demographic-rearmament-macron-plans-to-reform-parental-leave-and-fight-infertility_6440096_7.html

¹² See the chapter “The power of the Heart” in E. Gaudot, *Les Sept Piliers de la Cité*, Paris, 2022.

part of decisions? How many wars would never take place? How easier the peace processes would be?

This seminar was just about that: bringing radical changes to the ugliest feature of politics. From Virgil¹³ to Caravaggio¹⁴, to Deep Purple¹⁵ or the Wachowski sisters¹⁶, the hope and confidence in the “power of love” has not changed: *Amor Vincit Omnia*.

∞ ∞ ∞

1. Sharing is caring

The first part of the discussion was dedicated to hearing the stories and listening to the testimonies. For there was historical depth around the table. Personal histories, of course, but through these very particular experiences, collective histories. Tales of communities, regions and countries brutalised by wars, lives broken, souls burnt and people hurt in their flesh. A shared experience from Europe’s Balkans to the historic Palestine, and from all over the world. And a lesson of courage, resilience and will to build peace out of fear and suffering.

CYPRUS – Healing the history

Host of the event, Cyprus set the scene with **Charita Mandole** and **Nur Koprulu**. Indeed, the choice of Cyprus to hold the discussion was not just motivated by its mythological symbolism of being Goddess of Love Aphrodite’s birthplace. It remains a wounded land, still haunted by the ghosts and memories of a horrific war. And some lessons can be learned from the Cypriot women who had to overcome its painful memories.

The 1974 Turkish invasion of Cyprus¹⁷ caused deep trauma, displacing hundreds of thousands, dividing the island, and leaving a vivid scar in the country’s memory. This painful history stood at the centre of the testimony of one victim of 1974, who used to live in a village of Kyrenia, where the invasion landed: *We woke up on the 20th of July hearing the bombardments [...] the airplanes going around the island. I was with my husband and my two kids. [...] then they shoot a man next to me [...] My husband was dead, but my son was alive, bleeding...*

The conflict led to thousands of deaths, missing persons, and atrocities on both sides. Families were torn apart, villages destroyed, and cultural heritage erased. The ceasefire left Cyprus

¹³ *Eclogues X*, 69 (38 BCE)

¹⁴ Painting, 1601, Gemeldegalerie, Berlin - <https://www.the-artinspector.com/post/caravaggio-amor-vincit-omnia>

¹⁵ Deep Purple, “Love conquers all”, 1990, Sony Music, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rNlfZr5rg_U

¹⁶ “Amor Vincit Omnia”, final episode of *Sense8*, a Netflix series, 2018, <https://www.forgetfulfilmcritic.com/home/2018/07/13/sense8-amor-vincit-omnia>

¹⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jul/17/archive-1974-turkey-invades-cyprus>

divided, with a heavily militarized buffer zone under UN control¹⁸ and an occupying army in its northern part. The pain and its memory persist through generations, with unresolved grief, lost homes¹⁹, and ongoing political tensions. While the trauma of the invasion remains manifold stronger on the Greek side, the Turkish Cypriots too were displaced, fleeing an inhospitable south.

Unfortunately, with 1963 intercommunal violences, each side started to have an Other and that Other was interpreted as either Greek Cypriot or Turkish. [...] It did not work for a common identity to flourish on this island.

The estimate is that around 180,000 to 200,000 Greek Cypriots fled south²⁰, and a significant Turkish displacement. Some 50,000 to 60,000 Turkish Cypriots (from the 1963-70 and 1974 movements) had to move to the north, according to some studies²¹. There too the painful memories have lingered. Former homes, now occupied by strangers, who themselves were victims of the historical violence.

I'm actually representing perhaps a new generation [...] I am the daughter of a [Turkish Cypriot] migrant family from Limassol and I always have found myself within the heart of Cyprus question, as that my parents were always sharing stories about Limassol.

But above all, the invasion inflicted particularly profound trauma on women. As war erupted, thousands of them directly bore the brunt of the attack. Documented by a report of the "European Commission of Human Rights", adopted by the Council of Europe in 1976²², many endured sexual violence, a brutal weapon of war, leaving lifelong scars and silence due to stigma²³.

The Turks were kicking and beating our husbands and men. [...] They had these big knives with blood on it. There was also a British woman who had wounds on her legs covered all over in blood, who said she had been raped.

Mothers searched desperately for missing sons and husbands, while widows struggled to rebuild shattered lives. Pregnant women and young girls were among the victims, their suffering often ignored in official narratives.

¹⁸ <https://unficyp.unmissions.org/about-buffer-zone#:~:text=After%201974%2C%20most%20of%20Cyprus's,180%20km%20across%20the%20island.>

¹⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jul/20/cyprus-remains-divided-50-years-on-war>

²⁰ S. Egeli, *How the 1960 Republic of Cyprus was Destroyed*, Kastaş Corporation, 1991

²¹ <https://academic.oup.com/jrs/article-abstract/7/4/328/1532026?redirectedFrom=PDF>

²² https://www.stradalex.eu/en/se_src_publ_jur_eur_cedh/document/echr_6780-74_001-142540

²³ <https://cyprus-mail.com/2024/07/28/the-cyprus-war-rapes-shrouded-in-a-wall-of-silence>

There was a girl, she was 19 years old. They took her and raped her.

Forced from their homes, women became refugees overnight, losing security and dignity. The invasion's legacy endures, with survivors carrying the weight of grief, resilience, and unresolved justice. They "grew up with a photograph in hand"²⁴ in search and memory of the deceased and disappeared.

Reconciliation is a process. A difficult and long one, as emphasised by this comprehensive IDEA *Handbook*, from 2003²⁵. For Cyprus, as for everywhere, it starts in the direct human connection, the reestablishment of a link between the individuals, a recognition of the "same" in the "other".

There was a, a gentleman asked, are you from, are you Turkish? We said, yes. You're from other side. We said yes. And he gave me figs. [...] I'm also a migrant from the north he said [...] So then you can have that, touching feelings with one another. Something reciprocal.

Turning yesterday's foe into today's friend is at the heart of the European construction. But as the European path to peace also demonstrates, it is a huge challenge to build a community designed to overcome the lingering hostilities of the past. This is an endeavour for the next generations. *I think we have to also open eyes and see how we can contribute as much as we can to the entire nation, society that we live in. And we need to learn and find out the avenues for healing.*

And in this process, women have a specific role to play. *Being vulnerable or being weak are adjectives attached to women. But being vulnerable or having compassion or heart does not make us weak. Maybe that heart and touching, that compassion, is needed to heal both nations and everyone else around the world.*

There is no weakness in recognising the necessity to move on. In this matter, Cyprus, a Mediterranean island with lasting patriarchal culture and reflexes stands as a textbook case, as analysed by Cypriot scholar Maria Hadjipavlou²⁶, who underlines the exclusion of women from the Cyprus peace negotiation process²⁷ despite international frameworks like UN Security Council Resolution 1325, which advocates for women's involvement in peace processes.

Women should be part of the peace process, because this understanding of compassion, heart and love should be added to the negotiation table, which is, I think, most of the time is very masculine.

²⁴ <https://www.ekathimerini.com/in-depth/society-in-depth/1253610/we-grew-up-with-a-photograph-in-hand/>

²⁵ Cf. D. Bloomfield, T. Barnes and L. Huyse (ed.) *Reconciliation After Violent Conflict A Handbook*, IDEA 2003, <https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/reconciliation-after-violent-conflict-handbook>

²⁶ <https://www.womeninconflictzones.com/maria-hadjipavlou-bio/>

²⁷ <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/c05/exclusion-women-peace-and-security-agenda-cyprus-peace-negotiations>

Granted, in 2021, the Republic of Cyprus introduced a Women, Peace and Security National Action Plan. But, according to further analysis²⁸, these efforts have so far remained unsuccessful. The path is still long.



PALESTINE – Women make peace

The emotion was palpable and raw, as the discussion turned to one of the sorest spots in today's world, with **Reem Alhajajra** and **Nirit Sternberg**. The Israel-Palestine conflict is a century-old struggle over land, identity, and sovereignty. Rooted in British colonial rule, Jewish immigration, and Arab resistance, it took its current and modern shape with Israel's creation in 1948, following the Western powers' attempt to redeem their failure to protect the Jews of Europe from the *Shoah* (catastrophe in Hebrew). The establishment of the new country meant also the immediate and massive displacement of hundreds of thousands of people, also known as the *Nakba* (catastrophe in Arabic).

People say there were different wars. But I, as a 73 y-o Israeli, I actually think that we have gone through a constant war, with a little bit of breaks in between.

Since then, many wars and political developments have deepened divisions, and an unending accumulation of violence, culminating this last year, have led to a seemingly unbridgeable and widening gap of distrust, hate and mutually inflicted pain.

In this recurring and worsening cycle of violence, Israeli and Palestinian women have borne unique burdens in the conflict, as documented by UN experts²⁹. Women from Israel, especially in border areas, face rocket attacks, terror threats, and military service, with many losing loved ones in war. Women from Palestine³⁰ endure military occupation, home demolitions, and restricted movement, most often raising their families amid hardship.

I live in a refugee camp in Bethlehem. I am like the granddaughter of the Nakba and I am still living in a camp, with my kids. This camp gets violence mainly every day from the Israeli soldiers.

Many suffer from poverty, trauma, and violence, with limited access to healthcare and education. A 2024 study by the European Institute of the Mediterranean underlined how much the recent evolutions of the conflict have disproportionately affected women, whether through the

²⁸ <https://www.prio.org/publications/13284>

²⁹ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/11/women-bearing-brunt-israel-gaza-conflict-un-expert>

³⁰ <https://palestine.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/peace-security-humanitarian-response/facts-and-figures/conflict-in-palestine>

creeping militarization of the Israeli society³¹ or the gender-based structural discrimination of the Palestinian society³².

Palestinian women don't have the right to be part of the decision or to have a good life. Especially in politics: Palestinian women don't have any role. And if they do, this is because they're serving a special agenda from their husband or family.

In addition, women of this war-ridden region face heightened health risks due to damaged medical facilities and limited access to essential services. *As usual, women only receive the results of the war but they don't have any input of making the war or start the war. And big part of victims are the women and kids.*

On both sides, the horrific aftermath of “the 7 October” has entrenched fear, grief, and rage, making peace and reconciliation even more elusive. *We have gone through a devastating time in Palestine and Israel. We are drowning in pain and suffering and we are mourning the situation. But as both communities grieve for their losses, and rejoice in the recent exchanges of hostages and prisoners, some women also are trying to lead crucial peace efforts. We have a lot of mutual pains that happening to our people every day. Nevertheless, we are still there and we will be there to try to bring peace to our place.*

Unfortunately, despite their suffering, women’s voices are often sidelined in political and peace negotiations. *We know that we must continue our work and create a better future for our children and grandchildren because there is really no point in killing one another.* Grossly underrepresented in formal negotiations, the involvement of Israeli and Palestinian women in the peace movement has been mostly confined to the civil society initiatives³³. But some of their organisations have played critical roles in civil society for decades, advising negotiators and building grassroots support for the peace process, like in 2016 in Sderot – or in 2022 and 2023 when two of these movements organised common demonstrations³⁴. *We try our best, “Women of the Sun” and “Women wage Peace”, to stay together and to make the women’s voice active. We said we don't want to only be the victims all the time and to be used as sacrifice for society. We want to have a part of the decision and part of the change in it. So, we ask for our safety and the safety of our kids.*

This is the very substance of the 2023 “**Mothers’ call**” launched by the two associations: “We, Palestinian and Israeli mothers, are determined to stop the vicious cycle of bloodshed and to change the reality of the difficult conflict between both nations, for the benefit of our children”³⁵.

³¹ <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/one-nation-under-militarism-a-reflection-on-a-society-at-war-with-itself/>

³²

<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/document/activities/cont/201110/20111027ATT30536/20111027ATT30536EN.pdf>

³³ <https://www.cfr.org/womens-participation-in-peace-processes/israel-and-palestinian-territories>

³⁴ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/02/02/women-peace-israel-palestine-gaza/>

³⁵ <https://www.womenwagepeace.org.il/en/the-mothers-call-2023/>

Every Word in the Mother's Call was decided together and agreed upon. And we call the women in the world and men to join us in this call and stop violence.

On behalf of “4 million mothers”, the Call urged the leaders to “show courage and vision”, to “heed the voices and will of the peoples”. Calling “on the women of the world to stand by us for a future of peace and security”, the text received global accolade, from the US to the Vatican, and both organisations were jointly nominated for the 2024 Sakharov Prize of the European Parliament³⁶, underlying the European spirit of reconciliation beyond borders. *We must find a way to communicate our willingness to live in peace. Between the Jordan and the sea, all 14 million Israelis and Palestinians have a mutual homeland. We have to understand no one is going anywhere, to find a way to understand the differences in culture, accept them and embrace them, and learn to live in harmony and peace. Because we don't bring children to the world to find them ending dying in wars or in prisons.*

Quite simply, then, the demand is peace and safety, that *Palestinian and Israel leaders get back to the negotiation table*, but also for the women to be part of this table. Because, *what women can bring to the negotiating table is very different to what most men bring. They have the capacity to find empathy in them and understand the pain that people are going through.*



NIGERIA – The soft power of one

Soft power is about attraction, about sustaining that softness in us to make that difference in our different localities. But beyond that, because that is for who we are. The next testimony came from Nigeria. A country where violence against women is widespread³⁷, driven by conflict, poverty, and entrenched patriarchy. Gender-based violence includes domestic abuse, sexual violence, child marriage, and human trafficking according to UN agencies³⁸.

Boko Haram, a Muslim rigorist, sectarian armed group in open conflict with the Nigerian authorities, and other militias, abduct and enslave women, subjecting them to rape and forced marriages³⁹. In conflict zones, sexual violence is used as a weapon of war. Cultural norms often silence survivors⁴⁰, while weak law enforcement enables impunity. Economic hardship and displacement further expose women to exploitation. Despite advocacy efforts and legal reforms,

³⁶ https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/en/video/infoclip-sakharov-prize-2024-finalist-women-wage-peace-and-women-of-the-sun-israelpalestine_1262047

³⁷ <https://www.unicef.org/nigeria/reports/16-facts-about-violence-against-women-and-girls-nigeria>

³⁸ <https://nigeria.unfpa.org/en/publications/gender-based-violence-and-harmful-practices-against-women-and-girls-nigeria>

³⁹ <https://gsdrc.org/document-library/women-gender-and-the-evolving-tactics-of-boko-haram/>

⁴⁰ <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Culture-of-Silence-and-Wave-of-Sexual-Violence-in-Olukemi-Folakemi/714609f86c3d70563a7a521f164ffad84a5e0dc0>

including the Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act, systemic failures leave many women unprotected and without justice⁴¹.

A lawyer and fierce advocate of women's rights, **Hauwa Ibrahim**, is a human rights activist, who has been long engaged against violence toward women, particularly those persecuted under Sharia law in northern Nigeria. A Sakharov Prize recipient in 2005, she was born to a humble family, and had to escape forced marriage at a very young age.

I was born in a very small village without no facilities, no electricity, no water, no road, nothing. I was not supposed to go to school at all because at the age of 11 I was given out to marriage.

She overcame societal barriers to become one of Nigeria's most prominent female lawyers, a teacher at Harvard and gained international recognition for defending women sentenced to death by stoning for alleged adultery⁴², often under dubious evidence after unfair trials.

Because of my background, I could relate to a lot of disadvantages and difficulties in people that share my voicelessness, my powerlessness, my illiteracy and my poverty

Her work has exposed the gender injustices embedded in Nigeria's legal and cultural systems. Despite threats to her safety – *but we women do not run* – she continues to fight for women's rights, using education and advocacy to drive lasting change.

And using as well her knowledge of both Sharia law and its clerics. *I was born a Muslim, so to practice in Sharia was natural and normal. [...] At that moment, I had 47 cases of women and children. [...] I accepted to come and meet the Mullahs in the huge mosque.* A defining moment when the strategy of confrontation turned to an opposition of soft power: speaking with humility, respecting the cultural features, avoiding all the traps and instead baiting the clerics to face their potential contradictions.

For nine months they had refused to see me. And we were having a conversation with a simple act of understanding the dynamic of the country, culture, humility, and knowing our position in our different society and how we can play with it for good. They listened to me.

The strategy appealed to their sense of fatherhood, stroking the masculine egos, and respecting the position of power, a delicate equilibrium, particularly when faced with their own illiteracy: *some of them couldn't even read [the Quran] in Arabic.*

The strategy can also appeal to their son's hearts. Like these Boko Haram leaders, imprisoned, but who refused to cooperate in one case of kidnapped girls. *Is there a mother in their life? [...] In their villages, we met the mothers [...] we brought them to the prisoners [...] and this boy hugged his mum [...] and they cried [...].* And thus, all the information the authorities could not

⁴¹ https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4015387

⁴² <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/w3ct4xhg>

obtain through torture and bad treatments became available. The heart had spoken. The power of mothers: *we need to know it reside inside of us.*

The things determination and fortitude can achieve... *As women, what are your leverages? Mine was to have the strength to stand on my feet.*



BALKANS – Women build peace

For me, the soft power of the mothers is the women letting us know that the blood of all human beings is always red and the tears of all human beings are always salty.

At the dawn of the 1990s, as the European community emerged strengthened from the end of the Cold War, preparing to become truly a Union, Yugoslavia's breakup brought ethnic violence and full-fledged war back to a continent that had believed itself in everlasting peace. Fuelled by nationalism, ethnic tensions, and territorial disputes, the Balkan wars in Croatia (1991-1995), Bosnia (1992-1995), and Kosovo (1998-1999) saw mass killings, ethnic cleansing, and war crimes. The Bosnian War was the deadliest, with the Srebrenica massacre killing over 8,000 Bosniak men and boys⁴³.

There too, the wars left deep scars, with thousands missing, refugees displaced, and war criminals later prosecuted by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. During these repeated conflicts, women suffered horrific and widespread violence. Sarajevo endured years of siege, and sexual violence was systematically used against women⁴⁴. Rape in particular was used as a weapon of war⁴⁵, with thousands of women subjected to systematic sexual assault, forced prostitution, and slavery⁴⁶. In Bosnia, sexual violence was used as part of an ethnic cleansing strategy to terrorize and displace entire communities. Many women were held in rape camps, often impregnated and left with long-term trauma.

"Scattering of the Soul": this book with the testimonies of the victims recounts the horrible stories of the torturers killing on the most inhumane act that people can do to each other.

The psychological and physical scars of this violence lingered, and survivors often faced social stigma and isolation⁴⁷.

But as **Sonja Lokar** recalled, women in the Balkans also played crucial roles in peacebuilding, activism, and reconstruction. Realising that one woman alone was not enough, they united, founded *NGOs and got the support from outside, to help each other*. This might be the first lesson of the Balkan wars: when the courage of men falters, the resilience of women must take place. *The battle we started was that of women trying to prevent the war. [...] The first three women*

⁴³ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/thematic-work/transitional-justice/srebrenica>

⁴⁴ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2012/11/violence-against-women-war-legacy-bosnia-and-herzegovina-un-special>

⁴⁵ <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/10/26/rape-used-as-weapon-during-kosovo-war-says-ngo/>

⁴⁶ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/9527973/>

⁴⁷ <https://www.trtworld.com/perspectives/genocidal-rape-and-the-invisible-children-of-bosnia-48312>

who were killed in Sarajevo were the members of our peace movement. [...] These very women who did not succeed in this first step, they became the seed of the future movement of the women for a different world after the war.

But they were denied a seat at the peace negotiations, and in the peace process. That's why *in the long run, the only way is to take power*. Because otherwise, the decisions remain in the hands of the men. However, they played crucial roles in community rebuilding, particularly when it comes to the economy. They have been instrumental in post-war reconstruction through active participation in economic development and community rebuilding. For instance, women entrepreneurs have emerged as a growing market force, driving innovation and job creation, thereby fueling economic growth in the region⁴⁸. Still, despite these contributions, women still face systemic barriers⁴⁹ such as limited access to capital, markets, and networks, which impede their full economic engagement.

As noted by international institutions and other observers, addressing these challenges is crucial for harnessing the full potential of women's contributions to the region's recovery and development. Indeed, in spite of this economic and even political influence with sometimes high-level political positions in Serbia, Croatia or Slovenia, women in the Balkans have generally remained excluded from formal peace processes due to entrenched patriarchy, lack of political representation, and institutional barriers.

I think that this is what is the most important lesson from the wars in the Balkans. That women learn not to run, that women learn how to come together. The women learn to ask for everything, for everything, for a total change of the world they live in.

Decision-making remains male-dominated, marginalizing women's voices despite their leadership in grassroots reconciliation, trauma healing, and local conflict resolution efforts.



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2. Voices of Peace

The literature on the links between gender equality, women empowerment and their effect on a more peaceful society is abundant. The “Soft power of Women”, and particularly of Mothers, on peacebuilding and processes is sustained by many serious studies, experimentations and concrete examples. As one research, amongst other, puts it quite simply: “advancing gender equality and empowering women and girls not only supports fundamental human rights but

⁴⁸ https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2024-01/report_on_women_in_wb_economies_in_a_nutshell_17.02.2023_1.pdf

⁴⁹ <https://kvinnatillkvinna.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/WRWB2018.pdf>

builds a solid foundation for a more peaceful world”⁵⁰. Throughout the discussion and the testimonies, many aspects of this soft power have come out, in one or another form. The following succession is of course not exhausting the issue. However, it paints a reliable and eloquent picture of the sources and the effect of this “soft power”.

Not a victim!

The first question that arises when confronted with the sheer amount of pain and lingering trauma is the most evident and also the most important: how is it possible to surmount this absolutely devastating memory? Where lies the path from violence towards peace, beyond revenge, beyond anger?

We are fed up of being victims. We are fed up being always at the side which loses and gives blood and children and men in everything, because we were not asked anything at all.

One early step is always at the scale of the individual. It takes the moral and physical strength to accept to heal, and this strength might come from various sources, from faith to family, to medical environment.

I gather power from my children. As I said, I love everyone [...]. And I met a Turkish woman whose kids and husband were killed and I hugged her and prayed for her.

A good example of such initiatives to turn “victims” into “survivors” would be Medica Zenica⁵¹. Founded in 1993 during the Bosnian War, the organization offers medical, psychological, and legal support to women traumatized by war-related sexual violence. It promotes a holistic approach to healing, addressing both physical and emotional scars, and empowering women through vocational training and advocacy.

Women cannot, should not, be seen or treated like victims. A lot depends also from the perspective they adopt and from the way they are perceived by the – male dominated – institutions and powers. *We want to be agents of change. And if, if we are agents of change, we want to be politically strong and not treated as somebody who needs help and support.*



Forgive, don't forget!

That's why we should forgive and give love.

Forgiving is not forgetting. Forgiveness is not the absence of memory. It is the ability to overcome the memory. The recognition of the pain and the reinstatement of the human dimension of the narrative, rather than its political confiscation, supposes also the acknowledgement of facts.

⁵⁰ https://giwps.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Womens_Empowerment_Path_to_Peace.pdf

⁵¹ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/12295033/>

I think that we made a mistake because we did not work equally on the trauma issue.

In post-war Balkans, it was undertaken by some groups within the women's peace movement, who insisted on this aspect of the peace process, rather than the fight for political clout, led by other groups. In 2015, "Women's Court", a feminist Serbian peace movement pushed and established the Women's tribunal for former Yugoslavia to "encourage a different, feminist concept of accountability"⁵², a "safe place" where women's voices could be heard, but in closed environment, without any journalists, without public could speak about their experience.

From the testimonies clearly comes out that the recognition of the pain is an absolutely indispensable first stage to anything. Listening to the stories, sharing the testimonies, meeting other women who endured the same, or comparable, predicaments, particularly from the "other" community is paramount to build a different bond than the one established in the violence. This could be compared to the movements of fraternisation that happens during long protracted conflicts, such as World War One⁵³, because it shows the shared humanity beyond the divisive politics. In this regard, a bond of "sisterhood" has been quite central to the programmes of the NGO "Women for Women international"⁵⁴ in their treatment of women victims of wars and violences.

I was lucky not to experience the war since I was born 10 years after the invasion, but at the same time that intergenerational trauma is sparked again, every time I see what's happening in Palestine, in Lebanon, everywhere.

However, this is only a step towards serving justice. In this process of healing, traditional justice might not be enough. This is why "transitional justice"⁵⁵ seems crucial in the establishment of a meaningful peace process.

While transitional justice mechanisms often acknowledge the gendered nature of conflict-related violence, there is a persistent struggle to ensure that these mechanisms are fully resourced and inclusive of women's voices, according to the UN⁵⁶. The experiences of Colombia, Uganda or Sierra Leone⁵⁷ show that it also requires genuine empowerment of women, recognizing their essential role in shaping equitable and lasting peace. There was also the remarkable success in Ulster, in the resolution of the Northern-Irish conflict⁵⁸ – a peace process that much benefitted from the auspices of the European Union, leading to the Good Friday agreement⁵⁹.

⁵² <https://www.zenskisud.org/en/>

⁵³ <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/the-real-story-of-the-christmas-truce>

⁵⁴ <https://www.womenforwomen.org/blogs/power-sisterhood-and-healing-together-women-survivors-war>

⁵⁵ <https://www.ictj.org/what-transitional-justice>

⁵⁶ <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/Research-paper-Womens-meaningful-participation-in-transitional-justice-en.pdf>

⁵⁷ https://media.odi.org/documents/WPS_Transitional_Justice_FINAL_FCDO_v2.pdf

⁵⁸ <https://www.ulster.ac.uk/transitional-justice-institute>

⁵⁹ <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20230328IPR78601/parliament-marks-25th-anniversary-of-the-good-friday-agreement>

The Women, Peace and Security agenda created by the UN resolution 1325 explicitly aims to amplify women's influence in defining transitional justice mandates. And it stands at the heart of the EU's foreign policy peace action⁶⁰.



Educate, Empower!

One other lesson stemming from the testimonies is the crucial role of the children and education as a leeway of emancipation. In the face of a painful past and a difficult present, education is an obvious key to a future enabling empowerment and emancipation. As recalled by the words of **Christine Eggs**, *poverty is not only a lack of income, it is a multidimensional problem, but also lack of education, nutrition, access to health, access to information, to skills and knowledge*. Educating the women, from their youngest age, to their rights is paramount in the path to sustainable peace.

In its work, the FXB organisation⁶¹ has developed holistic models, like in Uganda in the early 1990's, after civil unrests. Five priorities were devised: access to income generating activities, access to education, access to nutrition, access to health and access to safe houses, water, hygiene and sanitation, but *the fundamental pillar was income generating activities*, especially targeted on women, particularly the young women and girls.

Uganda offers a good example of successful policies in the matter. When the government introduced an education reform scrapping school fees for primary school-age children in 1997, it generated an increase in education with a positive impact on women's empowerment. According to a study, it particularly improved "women's involvement in decision making within the household by increasing their likelihood of having a final say on issues related to their own health, about large household expenses, and regarding visits to family or relatives"⁶².

Promoting women can be part of a deliberate policy. Like in Rwanda, where it is pragmatically linked to national reconstruction: a stronger law for parity and the promotion political participation of women makes Rwanda a country where women represent 61% of Parliament's Members and occupy many other top positions⁶³.

Eventually, promoting women leadership has to start within the family. But it may run contrary to the established order of things and its cultural justifications⁶⁴. As explained by **Christina Kaili** from the Mediterranean Institute of Gender Studies, the goal is really *to empower the women to be part of the decision of their family and then to become community leaders, peer educators, etc.*

⁶⁰ https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/implementing-women-peace-and-security-agenda_en

⁶¹ <https://fxb.org/>

⁶² <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-demographic-economics/article/abs/education-and-womens-empowerment-evidence-from-uganda/C16C213E509B4C4FD3F14EFE0936CB6D>

⁶³ <https://www.gmo.gov.rw/news-detail/rwanda-maintains-its-top-position-in-female-representation-in-parliament>

⁶⁴ <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/toolkits/gear/legislative-policy-backgrounds/cyprus>



Change the boys, change the culture!

When my boys reach a certain age, they will have control over me. The society is involved in how I live my life, or I follow my political interest. From Cyprus to Palestine, from the Balkans to Nigeria, no matter the continent, patriarchal cultures have this in common: women, even mothers, always remain “minors” in the eyes of the law of men. There is the need for a special platform to make women aware and help them learn how really to help their children to be independent politically and to understand what's going on. That is one goal that presided to the establishment of an association like “Women of the Sun”.

Since 2000 and the wall, the only mutual language is hate. Now we try to use a new language, not to use hate speech, not to ask people to kill each other.

There is an evident gender dimension to the empowerment. The soft power of mothers must change men as well. *Mothers are already doing a lot. And it's not that we need only to educate boys, but we need to make men understand that they are fathers before being men today.* This is a matter of education of course.

Empower women requires political will. But what is very necessary is to educate boys and men and start from very early childhood development. So that they can become defenders of women's and girls' rights. Properly raised, they will become good and fair future leaders.

One interesting experience by FXB in Burundi consists in promoting a specific type of stove, whose form and operation allows men to keep their precious dignity while helping their wives to cook.

Adapting to the men's ego sounds like a good idea indeed.

And there is also the culture. There might be a tension between the call for education and the necessity to respect as much as possible the cultural context, including the men's position, especially when education offers merely a continuation of the cultural context. In her work on the history of male domination, French anthropologist Françoise Héritier pointed also how much women contribute to the perpetuation of patriarchal standards⁶⁵.

When it comes to history, obviously, programmes and school curricula must be redesigned as well. *It is very important is to teach the different narratives and realize that the narratives are created by politicians who want to do as much as possible to create trouble and conflict. And we have to work towards a combined narrative that will move us forward towards peace and security.* In Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the war ended without the victory, the institutional

⁶⁵ Françoise Héritier, *Masculin-Féminin, La pensée de la différence*, Odile Jacob 1996, <https://shs.cairn.info/revue-imaginaire-et-inconscient-2003-2-page-107?lang=fr>

arrangement that preserves and separates the three nations, cultures, and religions of the country, is complicated, flawed and dysfunctional. There, children go to different schools, where they learn different, antagonistic, glorified ethnic versions of their common history. All the chemical elements are ready for the next deflagration. In Cyprus the question is about shedding the yoke of a patriarchal society, bundled with a nationalist and conflictual mistrust for the other. Beyond schools, what matters is the narrative in the family, and the role of mothers is therefore crucial. Mothers of Israel, Palestine, Cyprus, and everywhere can change that, in *teaching their children not to kill each other*, teaching another language than the one of conflict and justified revenge that is often used around them.

Empowered women have an educational impact, through academia: *I would start by saying, covering whose history are we discussing today? By whom? For whom? Who is the other? Who is us? How can we listen to the other and basically strengthen the skills of children?* And politics: *One of the things women wage peace has done is we wrote a bill saying that the government of Israel has to do everything in her power to find diplomatic ways to solve problems instead of going to war.*

And there is eventually leading by example: *Some things do change. One people asked my son: what do you think about what your mother is saying? He responded: "what my mother is saying is right." I insist to have my position into my family. I insist to have my position in our society and in our government.*



Organise!

The power of one is greater when it is joined by many. Our modern history books are dotted with the images of collective mobilisation and massive demonstration for change. It could be the revolutionary women marching on Versailles, on 5 October 1789, to bring the King back to a starving Paris crowd. Or the demonstrations of the Women's Peace movement in 1915 protesting in vain against the first of the great modern butcheries. Or the suffragettes of the Women's Social and Political Union, demanding to have their say in politics through a vote. Or the factory workers of Herstal in 1966 Belgium striking for 12 weeks for equal pay. More ancient, in a 5th century BC most famous comedy, Aristophanes imagined the women of various Greek cities stopping the belligerents of the Peloponnese war by uniting and organising a sex-strike.

Whether small or big, the movement supposes at some point an organisation, a structure, with specific goals, strategy and preferred means of action. *If we want to give real power to mothers, and to women, we need to set up a collective effort.* In post-war Cyprus, the relentless and courageous protest of women, mothers and feminist movements have woven a web of NGOs and associations fighting for peace, despite the dominant political culture of division: *Life vs War. We have NGOs and coalitions like the Cypriot Women's Lobby, the Hands across the Divide, the Gender Advisory Team by communal groups.*

From Cyprus to Palestine, building feminist movements, and women's coalitions means that *each mother fighting for their children is also in sisterhood with the other women all over the world trying to bring peace.* There is a history of women successfully organising for peace. One could think for example of Mairead Maguire, a victim in the long sectarian civil war in Northern Ireland

who went on to build the Peace People movement in 1976⁶⁶. The end of the Northern Irish conflict is definitely a peace process in which women did play pivotal roles. For example, the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition an all-women, cross-community group its seat at the table after having heavily lobbied to allow representatives of women's voices to be included in the peace talks⁶⁷.

Alice Bernard of the Young European Democrats insisted on the importance of this transmission. *As the young generation, we need to know what happened, to be able to continue the fight along you, after you and with our own children.* The empowerment of women also goes through an education to the history of their mobilisation, their activism, with its successes and its failures. Eventually, civil society mobilisations have one objective: become political and change to the institutions. *We need to have politicians that have the willingness of doing whatever we talk about here, because we can have NGOs, we can have representative in the civil society, but if we don't grab this power and then impose ourselves at the table of negotiations without waiting for them to give us the power, we cannot do anything.*



3. Seven proposals to make peace a reality

We should allow ourselves to dream, dream of a better future and work towards that dream. It's very difficult to talk about peace, to use the word peace right now. But we really have to insist on continuing to use the word

It is unrealistic to expect all changes to happen simultaneously, and swiftly. Peace is like truth: it takes time, it is costly, complex and fragile. But the pessimistic lucidity about the dire state of our world must not prevent us an optimistic will for action. Ranging from very concrete to more diffuse, here are the seven recommendation that this group of women would like to offer to political leaders, decision-makers, EU officials, Members of the European Parliament, and anyone who believes that peace can be brought by involving women.

1. Quotas

In today's politics quotas for women allow to ensure fair representation, break systemic barriers, and strengthen democracy. They counter historical exclusion, amplify diverse perspectives, and lead to more inclusive policies. Evidence shows gender-balanced leadership improves governance, economic growth, and peace. Without quotas, progress remains slow, perpetuating male-dominated decision-making structures. into everywhere.

⁶⁶ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/articles/zgv8239>

⁶⁷ <https://www.ireland.ie/en/dfa/role-policies/northern-ireland/about-the-good-friday-agreement/>

2. Quotas in Peacebuilding

In application of the spirit and letter of UN Resolution 1325, women should be systematically part of the official peacebuilding processes. They should be recognised as legitimate powers in formal negotiations and granted the same respect and influence as their male counterparts. Women leaders argued for laws mandating 50% female representation quotas among peace delegations. *Men need to understand that nothing can be discussed anymore without women.* Quotas for women in parliament do work – it's time to demand that half of the official peace-making delegations be women.

3. Re-build a Global Women's movement for peace

The pioneer movements of the last century have stalled or disappeared. Since the Beijing conference in 1995, attempts to keep a global women's movement for peace have not been successful. As the world is currently taking the worrying direction of another arms race, the priorities of education, health, social concerns and care are endangered. So is peace. The world needs rather disarmament. The moment is right to step up and oppose this foolish trend, particularly in the countries where it is actually the strongest, from the US to Russia, and in the EU. One of the other immediate demands of the movement would have to ask for immediate ceasefires around the world, and mobilise in this sense.

4. Put every girl in the world to school

Make sure women are empowered enough to emancipate from the cultural obedience to patriarchal tradition.

5. Take back control on technology

The intrusive, invasive influence of technology is increasingly alienating our children, and our lives as well. Its power must be tamed and ring-fenced, through laws, and broader, deeper education.

6. Put women at the heart of the public space

It is not just our institutions, or our economies. Many studies have documented the facts that our cities, our streets, our medicine, our policies, are designed by men for an average denizen – who happen to be male. This can and must be reversed. Quotas will contribute to this cultural revolution.

7. Balance and retake control of the following five major industries

The **arms** industry, the **technology** industry, the **entertainment** industry, the **agrifood** industry, the **health** industry all have a too strong grip on our future. Education will not be enough if what we eat, what we watch and what medicine we take is not designed to sustain peace. Women must go beyond their usual concerns and question the motives, organisation and influence of these industries.

Conclusion – Giving peace a woman’s face, with Europe

These recommendations do not make a political platform. They represent aspirations as well as priorities. They set a horizon and draw an alternative picture. The picture of a world yet to come, a world that would have balanced out the sheer power of male domination and equalised it in a more perfect equilibrium.

In her novel *The Fifth Sacred Thing* published in 1993⁶⁸, US ecofeminist icon and writer Starhawk tried to reflect on the encounter between our current world and its idealistic opposite. In a post-collapse timeline, she pits exactly that confrontation: two political organisations that represent the tension in which we currently find ourselves. On one side, a magnified radical version of our worst: a militarised racist nation, based on slavery, debt, violence, exploitation of children, of women, and of nature. In its permanent search of new resources this nation decides to invade its northern neighbour, a utopian, also radical, version of what-should-be. This one is a peaceful, democratic, totally tolerant community where women are a full and important part of the power. Roughly anarchist, strongly spiritual, it is also resolutely and absolutely non-violent and deprived of any arms. And the question behind this powerful work of fiction is as simple as that: how do you, as a non-violent and pacifist, society resist, oppose and defeat the sheer brutality and violence of a neighbour who comes to take your life and freedom?

As a matter of fact, this is the question that Europe is currently asking itself. Built on a century-long aspiration to peace, the European Community, then Union, has always defined itself as a “project of peace”. Designed to foster cooperation between its unruly aggressive nations, used to settle their differences on blood-soaked battlefields, the European construction sought to reconcile the historical enemies, and particularly its archenemies France and Germany whose mutual eruptive hostility had brought destruction to the continent, and the whole world, twice in a human lifetime. A peace project, whose stability lies in economic integration, shared values, and democratic principles, Europe has rooted its entire external action on the dissemination of its model of conflict resolution. Through its diplomatic engagement, trade policies and development cooperation, the EU defends the peaceful resolution of disputes within and beyond its borders.

But in this new world co-designed by sheer imperialistic games of power between strongmen, the EU might be tempted to doubt itself. It might be tempted to abandon its historical path and values, and relinquish its message of peace and universal concord. It might be tempted to follow the imperialists’ call and join the choir of the warlords. Or it could remember. Remember its own history, its own values, its own project. Remember its great men and women. And particularly one of them: Bertha von Suttner. An Austrian pacifist, a writer, political activist, and the first woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize in 1905, she was the leading figure of the first modern peace movement at the end of the 19th century, which advocated for peace and disarmament.

She was a true European. A role model for today’s Europeans.

If war doesn’t have a woman’s face, maybe Europe could give peace one.

⁶⁸ Starhawk, *The Fifth Sacred Thing*, Bantam 1993