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# Holding onto Nonviolence and Feminism in the Midst of War

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by

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**Abstract:** The imperialist war against Ukraine has made questioning and rejecting violence as the only way forward ever more difficult. The doubling down on the militarisation that is piggybacking on the Russian invasion of Ukraine has led us to a point where war has become glorified, and our empathy and desire to stop the criminal and aggressive acts of Putin co-opted into militarised and binary ways of the political and economic elite; a point where the only option presented is more escalation, never de-escalation, never dialogue and negotiations. Non-violent voices are actively silenced, and peacebuilders actively dismissed, or even worse, made into villains. None the less, in the long run it is the voices for peace that will save lives and not the other way around. This article investigates the reasons why nonviolence and feminist demands centred around demilitarisation, justice, equality, and care is the only strategy that will help sow seeds of sustainable peace in Ukraine. It takes stock of feminist understandings of the gendered workings of war and looks at the insidious ways of militarisation, searching for spaces where feminist demands for demilitarisation and peace can be championed.

When Putin ordered Russian troops to invade Ukraine, attempting to restore Russia's position in the global imperialist chess game, the outrage and disbelief over another war being unleashed was widespread. For us that have experienced war, the images of destruction and suffering were all too familiar. Protests to stop the war, to stop Putin, took place all over the world.

But what followed had nothing to do with de-escalating the situation or ending the war and suffering in Ukraine. Instead, Russia escalated its aggression, the Ukrainian government answered with mass mobilisation and a plea for support in weapons (Reuters 2022), and the political leaders from the European Union (EU), USA, and elsewhere rushed to provide military support to Ukraine (Maïa De la Baume and Jacopo Barigazzi 2022; Steve Holland and Mike Stone 2022; Murray Brewster 2022). We immediately entered a time where shipping weapons into a hot conflict became the only form of “acceptable” support. While there has been some

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provision of humanitarian aid by mostly local organisations, the provision of weapons has been the main action from western governments. It is as if the governments were just waiting for an excuse to further embolden the military-industrial complex, throwing all their energy and all our money into enabling this war to continue.

In Ukraine, people are paying the highest price for this so-called strategy, dying by the thousands. The rest of us have been conditioned to silently accept this as the only adequate response to this conflict, and to accept the increase of militarisation and military spending of our own countries. These days, it is all about building up “defences” (Joseph Borell 2022a) joining military alliances (Jon Henley 2022), buying new weapon systems (Roger Jordan 2022), reintroducing conscription (France24 2022). As if our lives were not militarised enough.

Basically, everyone seems to be preparing for war, and very few seem to be interested in peace. Putin’s imperialist invasion of Ukraine has galvanized unprecedented support for meeting violence with more violence, more than any other conflict has ever managed to do in our recent history. Putin’s Russia is certainly not interested in de-escalation, still believing that its victory is imminent. But neither are Ukrainian’s western allies. Ukraine finds itself fighting an imperialist aggressor in a war that is described as somehow special and different from all other wars that have been waged before. We are made believe that all this bloodshed is worth it (Joseph Borell 2022b) because when it is “done” something will change, something will be different, a brave new world will emerge. But this is nothing but deception. After this war ends, there will be ten others, as there have been hundreds before. Imperialist wars, as the one waged in Ukraine, are all about grabbing power and market-shares and treating people and land as nothing more but resources and spheres of influence.

### **Dedication to war, indifference to peace**

The doubling down on the militarisation that is piggybacking on the Russian invasion of Ukraine has led us to a point where war has become sanitised, perhaps even glorified; a point where our empathy and desire to stop criminal and aggressive acts of Putin has become co-opted into the militarised and binary ways of the political and economic elite, where the only option presented is more escalation, never de-escalation, never dialogue and negotiations. It has brought us to a point where non-violent voices are actively silenced and where peacebuilders are being dismissed, or even worse, made into villains.

The political leadership of our countries seems dedicated to war and there is a huge discrepancy between that and the commitment to the wellbeing of people. Our governments continuously fail to find money for investments in lifesaving social and care infrastructure, but somehow manage to commit hundreds of billions of dollars for militaries and destruction. As an example, according to Fransen et al. the gap in social infrastructure investment in Europe is estimated at 100-150 billion EUR per year. But somehow when it comes to weapons, there are no gaps.

And when it comes to Ukraine, talks about humanitarian relief, negotiation of ceasefire, and securing peace are not prevalent. The governments in the global north in particular seem set on ensuring material conditions for the war in Ukraine to continue (Deutsche Welle 2022). Supplying weapons to Ukraine seems to be their main

tool. But there is something sinister with their militarised “solidarity” with the Ukrainian people: are they trying to save lives, or their own geopolitical positions? Because if it is lives, they are trying to save, more weapons and escalation is hardly the answer.

### **War, not peace, is in their interest**

It is not surprising that there is a conspicuous lack of interest among the USA, EU countries, and other North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) member states to truly, beyond declarative words, support negotiations and a peaceful resolution to the war in Ukraine. This is their chance to get rid of, or at least weaken, one of their key opponents in their imperialist game – and they and the people they claim to represent don’t even have to die for it. From these governments’ perspective, it is fully possible to climb over Ukrainian bodies to realise the geopolitical goals of their own countries. As for Russia, it has been clear from day one that Ukrainian lives hold no value for Putin, as he continuous to blast out his lies about how his imperialist war is about correcting a historical wrongdoing (Salvage Editorial Collective, 2022). This is nothing unique, unfortunately. Using nationalism as an easy mobiliser and reinventing history to fit expansionist purposes is as old as imperialism.

So here we are, neither the aggressor nor the victim sees a way out. The only option they see is militarily defeating each other, no matter the costs (counted primarily in Ukrainian bodies, of course). The entrenched positions have created a context where open talks about using nuclear weapons have become normalised (Acheson Ray 2022). Nuclear war is the logical extension of this approach. The ultimate violence against the ultimate enemy.

### **Justifying the unjustifiable**

To justify all of this, these governments dress up political ambitions and geopolitical and economic interests in alluring narratives of belonging, historical rights, and heroism. In these narratives, there is no space for medals and support to peace-builders, service providers, humanitarian workers, and first responders – those that save and not take lives. In these narratives, there is no place for those that refuse to fight, to kill or be killed.

War turns the militarisation of our societies and lives into something that is desirable, and opposition to it something that is punishable (Chico Harlan 2022). Militarisation can come riding on the back of the worthiest causes, like the claim that more weapons are needed to save lives, making it difficult for us to withstand its pull. When it comes to the phenomenon of militarisation, professor Cynthia Enloe is well-known in feminist circles as the one that constantly pushes us to stay “responsibly curious about full accountings of militarization’s gendered processes and costs” (Phoebe Donnelly 2020). I understand this to mean that no parts of war, or its actors, should ever be left unscrutinised – and this includes interrogating what asking for more weapons will mean for women in the long run, but also what it will mean for queer and other people that are marginalised or made invisible in the current narrative of heroic men and victimised women.

Of course, the narratives of heroism are seductive, especially to boys and men who have been raised to believe that soldiering is a passageway to manhood, that dying on the battlefield represents strength, and that refusing to do so is not a demonstration of love for life and fellow human being but a great disappointment and treason to the flag, nation, and country. But dressing up war and necessity to defend oneself in a veil of heroism leads us only to believe that there is something to gain in continuing the violence – whether it is territory or a patriarchal notion of glory.

### **There is no winning the war**

The simple truth is that once war and violence break out, we have already lost. Some have lost their lives, other their homes and close family members and friends. And we have all lost our right to live a life in dignity, as the consequences of war linger on for many years to come. From Colombia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Iraq, Yemen, Syria, Nigeria, to the Democratic Republic of Congo, the evidence is telling. Waging war has never saved or improved anyone's life. Peace, on the other hand, has.

War is hell for all people affected. Its consequences are manifold and range from physical harm, death, displacement, damage to communities and to the environment to trauma that spans many generations. War causes loss, destruction, pain, suffering, longing for a home and life that was once had. The ability to recover from it stretches far beyond reconstruction of damaged infrastructure. The sense of insecurity and precariousness lingers on for many years, perhaps generations. There is no winning side. The people that are forced to endure unimaginable violence are the ultimate victims, but even the people who are conscripted and forced to inflict violence are victimised, as often refusing to fight is punishable. Both civilians and soldiers are at risk of severe psychological trauma, as the violence they endure, witness – or, in the case of soldiers, inflict – will haunt them for many years to come. Our mental and healthcare institutions are mostly unprepared for massive number of people that exhibit symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in a post-conflict context, leaving people to figure out their trauma on their own. Untreated PTSD amplifies the already present violence, not at least gender-based violence, making the harms our societies have to deal with never ending.

Our societies also must deal with other forms of violence, less visible and talked about. When the killing stops, without a vision of peace grounded in justice, solidarity, and care, the path to reconstruction quickly becomes riddled with neoliberal interventions that breed poverty, corruption, and exploitation of land, resources, and people. The approach by the international community when it comes to post-war recovery almost always fails to support building sustainable peace with a focus on the needs of the people. Instead, standardised neoliberal policies are implemented that give preference to private sector actors and the so-called free market over social and care infrastructure. The evidence is telling from conflicts all over the world (Carol Cohn and Claire Duncanson 2020). Things will not be different in Ukraine, as implementation of neoliberal reforms and policies have been long under way, and there is nothing that indicates that things will change after the war (Natylie Baldwin 2022).

The only people that gain from keeping the conflict going are those men that claim decision-making power on behalf of the rest of us; the men (and also few women) that will profit from the arms trade but that will never step foot on the battlefield, never aim their gun at other human beings, never send their children to death. Instead, they will reap the profit of arms sales and then they will continue making profit on the ashes of our destroyed homes and lives.

These profiteers continue to glorify war, working to convince us that there are no nonviolent ways to resolve conflicts, turning the real reasons they wage war into romantic stories about belonging, and how they, once they win the war (no doubt with our bodies), will provide us with freedom, security, prosperity, and peace. Yet that peace never comes. What does come is the perpetual demand for more power, resources, and more bodies to dispose of.

### **War facilitates violence, hate, misogyny, and othering**

Success in war is measured in dead bodies and how much pain and loss can be inflicted on the enemy. There is no playing nice in war – the simple truth is that war normalises and facilitates hate. It facilitates hate and violence on a collective and individual level, and it treats human beings as cannon fodder, as disposable bodies. This process is enabled by the overarching project of “othering” people – of manufacturing consent for violence by building up notions of “us” versus “them” in order to justify the continuation of war and the exclusion of certain people from certain countries, or from peace itself.

Women, queer people (Michael K. Lavers 2022), and other marginalised communities, like Roma community (Sean Benstead 2022), have already ended up at the sharp end of the violence in Ukraine. And that is the thing with weapons: they are hardly ever just used for “worthy” causes. Sooner or later, they are used against everyone that is seen as a threat to power or simply perceived as being different. Sooner or later the violence turns towards feminists, human rights defenders, political opponents, those that voice their disagreement with the war machine, or those who are perceived as different, due to their ethnicity or gender identity (Ben Hunte 2022).

The war in Ukraine has created a perfect opportunity for far-right groups from Europe and beyond (Cynthia Miller-Idriss 2022), who see Putin’s war on Ukraine as an opportunity to both gain military experience and win political points for their fascist ideologies. The men who have flocked to Ukraine from other countries to fight alongside the Azov regiment (Aljazeera 2022) and other units like it, have been given free reign, as for the time being they are fighting the same cause as the Ukrainian government. Their presence, even when previously challenged, has become more acceptable, even praised (Anthony Loyd 2022).

This should be a massive red flag for those supporting the supply of weapons to Ukraine. What will guarantee that those receiving these weapons will allow themselves to be disarmed and demobilised once the war is over? What sort of political (and military) power will these groups wield within Ukraine after the war? What will they do with their newly gained military experience and equipment? Who will they point their guns at next?

And where will these weapons end up? Once conflicts are over, weapons that have poured into countries at war tend to end up on black markets, resold to other conflict zones, to be used far beyond their intended recipients and intended targets. As our governments flood Ukraine with weapons now, what measures are being put in place to prevent this from happening yet again?

But even without asking what happens after the war is over, the arming of these groups right now should be a red flag for feminists, other progressive movements, queer people, and minorities, as they have always been on the receiving end of fascist violence. We must interrogate the narrative that weapons save lives. Nonviolence is the only true protection for women, queer, minority communities, and other marginalised people.

### **Holding on to non-violence and feminism**

This is obviously an incredibly difficult position to hold onto during a time when the violence and injustice towards the people of Ukraine is so blatant. We all witness in real time the destruction and indiscriminate force Putin's troops have unleashed on civilians in Mariupol, Kharkiv, and all around Ukraine; we all see the bombing of towns and cities, the attacks on hospitals and homes. We all read accounts of sexual violence and torture. And we all witness the defiance the people in Ukraine have demonstrated in light of this brutality. But as difficult as this conversation is, it is one that needs to be had, sooner rather than later, because the consequences of accepting that militarisation and violence are the only way forward can be inconceivable for Ukraine, for our common future, and for humanity.

We must reject the framing that violence has no alternative. We must reject the idea that under the current circumstances in Ukraine there is no space to actively work to end the war in nonviolent ways. This position does not stand in contradiction to the fact that the people of Ukraine have a right to self-defence, but it does sketch out an alternative path to the current one where supporting Ukraine is equal with weapons shipments, and nothing else.

Even within Ukrainian feminist circles the call for supporting Ukraine with weapons has been strong, prevalent perhaps, which is explained by the military might of the Russian army, and the need to ensure material conditions for self-defence of Ukraine, and in extension, of Ukrainian women. Feminists and peacebuilders from outside Ukraine that have denounced militarisation as a solution have been called dogmatic and naïve, even colonial for not acknowledging Ukrainian demands for weapons as situated in their experiences of war. But I want to argue that it is exactly the experiences, knowledge, and feminist reflections on so many wars before the one in Ukraine that has forged the feminist, anti-militarist position. It is the outcomes of so many wars before that have convinced feminists of how imperative it is for us to push for peaceful resolution even harder, exactly because we know what is at stake for women and other marginalised people during war.

There is nothing naïve or dogmatic about wanting a negotiated solution to the war in Ukraine, to believe that diplomacy and negotiations can be a way out. There is nothing naïve about the realisation that the longer the war goes on the more people will die and suffer, and the harder it will be for communities to recover, for justice

to even stand a chance. The longer the war goes on, the more entrenched and polarised positions will get. The influence of those committed to violence will grow until there is no space for peace left.

It is of course not surprising that not all feminists share the same understanding of the importance of nonviolent resistance or of de-escalation or negotiation. Feminists are as diverse as any other movement. However, all feminists share an understanding that wars are thoroughly gendered – from the way they are waged and experienced to how we recover from them. That understanding is what has guided feminist interventions in various conflicts throughout decades. During the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the support and advocacy of international feminists is what pushed the international legal system to improve the way it prosecutes rape and sexual violence as part of war crimes (Kristen Campbell and Gorana Mlinarević 2022). In Syria, feminist demands for effective participation of women during peace negotiations put the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 and the entire women, peace and security agenda to the test, exposing the complicity of international mechanisms when it comes to exclusion of women, beyond declarative commitments (Madeleine Rees 2014). In Colombia, feminists pushed for the content of their peace agreement to include commitments to reparations, community recovery, and gender equality further than any other peace agreement had done thus far (Catalina Ruiz-Navarro 2019).

Our history is full of examples of the important roll feminists have played in pushing back against war and militarism, at both national and global levels, keeping our communities and planet away from the brink of annihilation. Feminists in each national context have been able to advance their responses to conflicts learning from decades, if not hundreds, of years' worth of collective dedication to peace. Our efforts have not yet led to abolition of violence and war – for that we need to find a way to smash the patriarchy and to demilitarise. But our collective efforts have made life under war more bearable, the crimes more prosecutable, the solidarity more effective. Our failure to abolish violence and war means that we need to step up our game and sharpen our tactics, not surrender to the ways of patriarchy and militarism. In the long run, from the perspective of saving lives and pushing back against patriarchy, feminists have more to gain in demanding peace than demanding weapons.

### **Denouncing war, demanding peace**

There are plenty of spaces where violence and destruction are being discussed and actively pushed for, but hardly any spaces to strategies for peace. If feminists and peacebuilders don't actively work to create these spaces, no one else will. As with other conflicts, eventually the war in Ukraine will reach a point when some sort of an agreement will be made. Hopefully that will be sooner rather than later. If this time comes without a strong presence of a feminist peace voice, the men with guns and bank accounts will shape that vision of peace for everyone. They will be the sole winners of the war and the exclusive architects of "peace".

There are many parallels to be drawn between the war in Ukraine and the war that took place in my home country, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), in the 1990s. Many differences as well, of course, not at least with respect to the response of the

international community – which, unlike in Ukraine, enforced a weapons embargo on BiH. But what has been absolutely the same is the approach that only men with guns matter in war and in peace.

In 2020, BiH marked 25 years since the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement. These years have given us plenty of space to reflect, from a feminist point of view, what giving in to militarism has meant for our society, and these reflections are valuable beyond BiH (Gorana Mlinarević and Nela Porobić 2021). Men with guns and power don't demilitarise once the fighting stops, they simply ensure that the society shifts from one form of militarisation to another. They repackage their militarised ways in a way that will ensure they can keep holding on to and expanding their power; they rattle their guns whenever needed; and they point them at us when they feel their positions are threatened. In BiH, the fact that the peace processes were driven by men with guns meant that issues of importance for recovery of the people (not power) were largely unaddressed or addressed poorly. This has had real consequences on our fragile peace, and we find ourselves once again, 27 years later, fearing that the war might return. Not because the people of BiH are specifically prone to fighting, as the mainstream, racist narrative in western media wants us to believe, but because root causes to the previous conflict were never addressed. They couldn't have been addressed, because the only people with capacity to address them – feminists, peacebuilders – were silenced and marginalised.

Being persistently present with feminist demands centred around demilitarisation, justice, equality, and care is the only strategy that will help sow seeds of sustainable peace in Ukraine. While the voices for militarisation are loud and visible, there are indeed many voices for peace that go against the narrative that war is the only solution. The Ukrainian Pacifist Movement Against Perpetuation of War issued a statement condemning “the active burning of bridges for a peaceful resolution of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine” (Pressenza New York 2022); the Feminists Against War issued a Manifesto signed by feminist from all over the world demanding “a redirection of the situation to break the militaristic spiral initiated by Russia and supported by NATO” (Feminists Against War 2022); Russian feminists have been on the streets protesting against the war from its very beginning (Feminist anti-war resistance 2022).

We need to demand that all governments listen to these voices, acknowledge that there are alternatives to more war, and for all their actions to be grounded in international law and their obligation to maintain international peace and security. This obligation starts with saving lives, not helping to take them. There are plenty of options. They can commit to delivering humanitarian assistance based on solidarity, care, and dignity, planned together with those affected by the war. They can change their public message from one supporting war to clearly supporting peaceful resolution by for example offering to host peace talks or support in organising them in a way that is inclusive of the people and communities that live in Ukraine, with extra effort to include marginalised groups. Organising dialogues and consultations with marginalised groups to ensure their input is reflected in any planned or ongoing peace negotiations is also something the governments can opt for. They can create safe public spaces for voices of war opponents to be heard and use all available dip-

diplomatic channels to push for de-escalation and dialogue. They can ensure that resettlement of refugees is efficient, dignified, and delivered without discrimination or racism and provide support and facilitate the resettlement of those who choose not to fight, ensuring that their right to return after conflict can happen without repercussion.

But we also need to make our anti-war feminist demands relevant beyond Ukraine. We need to make them matter for every potential conflict that might follow. Full and unconditional de-militarisation is imperative, including abolishing nuclear weapons, ending the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, stopping the arms trade, reducing military spending, dismantling the systems of war profiteering. These pursuits are concrete actions that will help dismantle the material conditions for war and help put a stop to the militarised binary narratives that keep us divided. In the current context this might seem an impossible task, but to borrow from the wisdom of Rosa Luxemburg: “Before a revolution happens, it is perceived as impossible; after it happens, it is seen as having been inevitable”.

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