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GENEVA BLOG – *Report from the Syrian Peace Talks*
CYNTHIA ENLOE,

Day I of the Syrian Women's Peace Talks in Geneva :
Prelude to the Official Syrian Peace Talks.
Monday, January 20, 2014

If you haven't been to Geneva, it's a beautiful city straddling the far end of the very large Lake Geneva. Alpine hikers only have to take a tram to start a day of mountain walking. On one side of the bridge is the old city - think Calvin - now small shops, cafes, museums. On the opposite side of the lake, where I am, are modern apartments, the big train station, halal butcher shops, and acres of glass high rise international agency offices: the UN refugee agency, the UN labor organization, the UN human rights council, as well as the offices of Doctors Without Borders, the International Committee of Red Cross, among dozens more.

The major transnational feminist organization with its headquarters here in Geneva is "WILPF," the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. Founded in 1915, in protest against the waging of World War I, WILPF is headed now by Madeleine Rees, one of the really smart feminist strategists who has been pushing for women's rights to be taken seriously in UN peacekeeping operations and in the crucial post-conflict transitional political arrangements. WILPF is one of the organizers of this gathering.

Also here taking part in these alternative Syrian peace talks are two Nobel laureates - from Northern Ireland (Mairead Maguire) and Iran (Shirin Ebadi). Shirin explained at lunch today that she's been forced to leave Iran now that the government has forcibly closed down her law firm because of its work for human rights advocates. With other Nobel women laureates, Shirin has created a Nobel Women's Initiative working internationally for peace.

We all gathered at the Graduate Institute, wonderful new glass buildings just a short walk from the UN. Lisa Prugl, a well known feminist International Relations scholar and a faculty member at the Institute, had arranged for the space. The politics of space is always interesting. We all sat in a big circle - we are feminists after all! The focus was and is: How to persuade the UN officials and the US and Russian officials - as well as all the Syrian men invited to the official peace talks table (which officially begin in two days) - that inviting the only men who wield guns (and the men with brief cases who have large armies behind them) to make peace is not a formula that will work. In fact, there's an international track record – evidence! - to prove that this "only men with guns can make peace" is not an effective formula.

Instead, the women who have come together here, as diverse as /we they certainly are (in experiences, ages, nationalities, occupations), agree: the only productive formula for

moving towards a sustainable ("sustainable" was used repeatedly - these are not "quick fix" sorts of thinkers) peace is to have at the official table (not mere "observers") representatives of those women civil society activists inside Syria. That is, sitting at the official negotiating table should be Syrian women who have knowledge about creating peace, reducing violence, creating a genuine social contract, AND who are not coming to the official table to promote post-war political careers for themselves.

In public, the government and international agency officials have learned over the last decade how to say the polite, diplomatic things about caring about women in war zones. But, in practice, they go on taking seriously only men with guns.

One Syrian woman active with civil society groups working inside Syria under terrible told us a story ("civil society " is the term used by all the women gathered here to mean: NOT militias, NOT political parties, NOT groups representing any regime; to create a civil society is to create a society of genuine citizens, not subjects). This woman's name is Rim Turkmani. Rim is an astrophysics professor and local community organizer (Rim could give her name, unlike many of the Syrian women activists here, who cannot give their names or be photographed - it's too dangerous). Rim explained to us that she comes from Homs, the Syrian city where the non-violent movement calling on the Assad regime to open up politics for a more transparent, democratic process began in early 2011. She said that no one in Homs ever used to identify anyone else or any neighborhood or village by its sectarian majority. That is, no one she knew in Homs called village X "Shiite" or suburb Y "Sunni." Rim: "I had a roommate and I didn't even know whether she was Shiite or Sunni. Who cared?"

But now, in year 4 of the violent conflict, Homs residents are being urged to think in these divisive sectarian terms. Rim blames this divisive new trend in part on outsiders, for instance, the Saudi, Qatari and Iran governments, each of which is pouring in money for their respective proxy fighters and political organizations, each of which wants to think of the Syrian war in those sectarian terms for the sake of their own regional ambitions. When US and other officials also start seeing any Syrian with an idea as "representing" one sect or another, then that plays right into this destructive dynamic ---It also, Rim told us, reinforces Assad's claim that only his regime represents "all Syrians," even though he has been playing the ethnicity and sectarian "cards" for years.

Listening to Rim's story, I was reminded of Iraqi feminists during the years of the US occupation saying that the more the US officials insisted on seeing Iraq's troubles in sectarian and ethnic (Sunni vs Shiite vs, Kurds) terms, the more Iraqis themselves, many of whom had married, had had friendships and neighborly relations without employing such narrow identity boxes, began to think of themselves and their fellow citizens in these divisive terms!

Oh, and all of this is after just Day 1! My wee head is bursting....

Geneva Blog - Day 2, Part A – Tuesday, January 21, 2014

More from Geneva --

A brief glimpse of blue sky over Geneva this morning, now back to chilly gray, a view snow atop the black mountains across the lake, but none of the snow in the city that is falling now in Boston.

I'm writing this on Tuesday on Wednesday, (my "Day 3," just to be confusing!), the day on which the official Syrian Peace Talks are supposed to start up in the mountain resort of Montreux, outside Geneva. A busload of women are on their way their now to hold signs and unfurl banners calling for peace and for Syrian civil society women activists to be at the official table.

The last we've heard, there will be 3 women in the Opposition's delegation and 2 on the Assad government's delegation. None of them have been given a speaking role. Last evening (Tues.) in the WILPF offices, at "the meeting after the meeting," as soon as the 3 Opposition delegations' women members' names came out, everyone around the crowded table (orange peels, coffee mugs, yogurt cups, notebooks, 6 Mac laptops) compared notes on what they knew of the three women appointed by the Opposition. Even though the male heads of the Opposition Council probably added them chiefly in response to Syrian activist women's persistent public calls for women's inclusion, none of the three are known civil society activists inside Syria..

This posed a dilemma: Should feminists be pleased or not that at the last minute the men leading each of the warring sides added a few women to their official rosters? To answer this salient questions, one has to be able to tell what is mere "window dressing." Then there's a follow-up question to answer: Can even a token be turned into something substantive?

The Syrian women civil society activists and their transnational feminist supporters (in groups such as WILPF, ICAN, Madre, Code Pink, and Sweden's Kvinna till Kvinna) never have called for just "any" women to be included. Rather, they have wanted Syrian women "at the table" who now are actively involved "on the ground" inside Syria with providing wartime aid, building community reconciliation and providing knowledge of what the majority of Syrian women want for their own and their country's futures. More on this below....

Yesterday, Tuesday, was "Day 2" of the alternative Syrian women's and their international supporters' gathering. We came from Italy, Bosnia, Sri Lanka, Northern Ireland, Britain, the US, Turkey, Iran, Norway, Sweden, Western Sahara, France, Germany, Guatemala – and probably other countries that I didn't catch. Most women had paid their own way, though several women whose experiences were important to be shared had had their travel expenses paid by generous donors. All together, there were about 80 of us crowded good naturedly into a room at the Geneva Graduate Institute.

From what anyone could tell, only a few embassies sent any staff to listen, a mere smattering of people from any of the UN agencies came, and no mainstream media seemed to be in the room. Code Pink activists had arranged for the day's discussions to be live Web streamed so as to broaden the global audience. Even with this savvy innovation, the story of the Syrian war and peace negotiations continues to be told by CNN, Reuters, the New York Times, BBC, and the rest of the mainstream media as if only men with guns and men from powerful gov'ts matter. How to "change the narrative of the politics of war?" is still a huge political challenge for women peace activists.

Tuesday (Jan. 21) morning started with a semi-circle conversation among women who'd taken part in previous peace negotiations. Each woman had lessons and caveats to offer the Syrian women about these political processes. The two Northern Irish women - Anne Patterson and Nobel Prize laureate Mairead Maguire - said that the key to their success in getting women with genuine representative (non-partisan) credentials into Northern Ireland's 1995 "Good Friday Accord" meetings was years of organizing across the Catholic/Protestant divides, women having mustered the courage and stamina to join with women with whom they deeply disagreed, women whose sons had shot their own children. Out of this trust-building they created a non-party coalition to run for the posts of peace delegation representatives, winning enough popular votes to be inside, "at the table." Anne and Mairead acknowledged that it can be pretty discouraging for Syrian women to hear that they had to take years to build such a cross-community anti-violence coalition. So they added: don't be daunted; find your own pace to fit your own Syrian conditions now.

Once inside the peace negotiations, Anne and Mairead recalled, they refused to let the "men's egos" subvert the talks: when opposing male delegates threatened to walk out unless they got their way, the women from the women's coalition talked them back to the table. Importantly, they told us, they insisted that in the formal peace agreement were inserted commitments by all sides to create new public commissions, one on poverty, the other on women's rights. Once created, each was headed by a woman. That is, the women's coalition realized that a peace agreement has to be a civil society rebuilding plan. Laying down weapons was itself not sufficient for reweaving a tattered social fabric.

Anne's and Mairead's message to the Syrian women and all of us listening: *don't imagine that external military intervention (i.e., the British Army's coming) will solve anything, *reach out even though it's excruciatingly hard, *build a genuine coalition among women for peace, a coalition that's driven by the demand for the end to violence, not by personal ambitions, *get inside, to the table, to be a signatory so you can hold all the other signatories accountable in the coming weeks and months -- and don't let opposing men's ambitions on show at the table prolong the violence. Finally, they warned us all: *don't imagine you can demobilize women's wartime organizing once the peace accords are signed - implementation of those accords will take years of continuous pressure, monitoring and public involvement by women.

Guatemalan feminist peace activist Luz Mendez spoke next. She told us that, initially, she

was on an official delegation to the Guatemalan UN-brokered 1990s peace talks that represented one of the opposing sides, the anti-regime insurgents. Their agenda: to end the 30 yr long deadly Guatemalan civil war. But, more significant, Luz told us, she also was simultaneously part of local women's civil society groups and kept constantly in touch with them. That open channel of genuine communication built trust between the official delegates at the talks and the wider citizenry whose priority was ending the violence. At the same time, this formal channel allowed for creative ideas, especially from women civil society activists, to make their ways into the official deliberations.

Thus these Guatemalan peace negotiations were structured differently than those in Northern Ireland. True, Luz was “at the table,” but for most of the talks she was the only woman in the room: 1 woman, 29 men. Still, the structure created for the talks gave civil society groups a formal channel through which they could monitor what was going on and send their own thoughtful experienced-based advice directly to the delegates. That made a major difference in the final agreement. Today, Luz warned us, though, post-war violence continues, including systematic violence against Guatemalan women, violence fueled not only by persistent poverty, but by the growing transnational drug trade.

Lutz’s double message to her Syrian counterparts and to all of us: first, the structure of any peace talks matter; it determines how transparent (or opaque) the talks will be, whether process of negotiation builds trust in the wider society or serves only to undermine what little social trust even exists; and, finally, creating a formal channel through which civil society activists’ ideas and priorities actually get on to “the table,” can positively effect the negotiations’ outcome.

Sitting next to Luz was a Sri Lankan woman who has been active in organizing Sinhalese and Tamil women during and since the deadly 25-year long conflict in her country. She confirmed her Northern Irish and Guatemalan colleagues’ point: don’t give up when your first try at building trust among women of warring communities fails. Her own initial efforts failed. She and other pro-peace women just kept at it, trying again and again until they could find common ground for diverse women to come together and, together, build a vision for a revived Sri Lankan peace-sustaining civil society.

Tuesday night, Code Pink activists arranged to have shown 3 documentary films by feminist filmmakers, each exploring women’s diverse experiences of conflict. One of the films was Abigail Disney’s much-acclaimed documentary “Pray the Devil Back to Hell.” The film documents how Liberian women managed, against all odds, to build a grassroots women’s movement in the midst of violence. Its activists decided not to wait to be invited into the Liberian peace talks. Instead, they dramatically forced their way into the masculinized negotiations and successfully pressed the rival men to reach a ceasefire.

Several people at the Geneva gathering have been wondering out loud if such direct popular action by Syrian women was going to be the only strategy that would compel the Syrian male-led warring sides to prioritize peace instead of their own political survivals. But here’s a crucial hitch: the Liberian peace talks – just as the Guatemalan and Northern

Ireland peace talks – were held in the country where the conflict was occurring – and where local women were creating their own peace movement. The official meeting place could be reached on foot or by bus. By contrast, the present Syrian official talks are being held hundreds of miles - and checkpoints, visas and plane flights – away from all but a small handful of Syrian women. This geographic choice by the talks’ international brokers (the US and Russian governments and the UN) has put the rival delegations well beyond the reach of any popular physical pressure.

I'll pause here. Next will come “Day 2, Part B,” focusing on what Syrian women told us later on Tuesday afternoon of their lives now in war and their efforts to provide support for everyone effected by the current violence and to craft a program for ending the escalating violence.

Geneva Blog - Day 2, Part B – continuing Tuesday, January 21, 2014

I've had the chance to go out for a walk along the lakeside -- a couple of hardy Swiss were IN SWIMMING -- it's about 35 degrees here....

So, to continue Yesterday morning, Tuesday, after hearing the Northern Irish , Sri Lankan and Guatemalan women peace activists describe how they managed to get women's collective foot in the formal peace talks door, we heard from the women sitting next to them in the semi circle (the rest of us were in outer rings of a semi circle). First, two women from Bosnia: they reported that that women from Bosnia – but also from Serbia and Croatia - scarcely had any voice at all in the 1995 US-brokered Dayton Peace Accords that ended the devastating four-year war in the former Yugoslavia. Like the current Syrian talks, the Yugoslav all-male negotiations were held far from the society in conflict: at the Dayton US Air Force base in Ohio. As an aside, one of the Bosnian woman said it was indicative that these *peace* talks were held on a military base!

Looking back now, the Bosnian women have concluded that one of the most damaging aspects of the US-brokered Dayton Accords was that they included a new CONSTITUTION! That is, it was bad enough that the peace agreement excluded women (and there did exist scores of women's groups in early 1990s Yugoslavia - one of the most prominent being the Belgrade Women in Black), and that these constitutional arrangements were not subject to an open popular vote, but even worse - with the US government taking the lead - was that by inserting a new constitution in the peace agreement, ethnic differences among the women and men of the now-fragmented Yugoslavia were hardened into legal and institutional barriers. This has made Bosnian women’s efforts over these last 17 years to build a genuine post-war civil society that crosses alleged ethnic identities almost impossible.

Constitutions matter. Writing a new constitution is integral to any transition from warring, fragmented society to a new civic culture. A constitution can either nurture societal reconciliation and the building of a sustainable peace or, contrarily, a constitution

can perpetuate masculinized elitism and social distrust and insecurity. Women civil society activists, thus, need to be inside peace talks; they also need to have influential roles inside any constitution-writing assembly.

Three women had joined the semi circle from the Western Sahara to share their own experiences with us. Two of them gave their presentations to us in Arabic, with their third colleague translating. You really get to see how the English language has become so dominant when you're sitting amidst women from a dozen countries; the common language that, say, Bosnian and Western Saharan women had to use to share their feminist ideas was English, even though English is each woman's own 2nd or 3rd language. Then, too, for any present day transnational efforts, those people privileged enough to have learned English are those most likely to be invited and to have their thoughts heard...Paying for a translator is part of broadening women's international participation.

These Western Sahara three women stressed how ineffective all the peace talks have been between the Moroccan government and the people of the Western Sahara. Women, they explained, have been totally excluded. Consequently, over the years -- they are now in year 14 of making their lives in what were intended to be "temporary" refugee camps! -- women who've become active in local affairs have tried at least to organize as women inside the camps and to get women into positions of some influence within the camps' leadership.

Still, worst of all, these three women told us, they today feel as though "no one thinks about us any more; the Western Saharan conflict is not on anyone's mind." I sat there thinking, that's true. I think about Syria, about the Congo, about South Sudan, but I don't even try to keep track of what has been happening to Western Saharan women.

In a short coffee break Tuesday I chatted with a woman who'd come to listen from one of the big Geneva-based international aid organizations. Her specific job there is to insure that her colleagues' work is "gender-sensitive." (I won't give the organization's name because, given how few staff people in that building are assigned the job of monitoring gender equity, it would be too easy to track her down). On Tuesday this woman was fuming. Only the day before she had gotten an email message from one of her senior male supervisors telling her that she should take care of the procurement of sanitary pads for delivery to women refugees. But this committed staff woman has nothing to do with procurement - that's an entirely different department. As explanation for his odd request, this senior man said, "I don't do women."

This, of course, is a large international organization which, on paper, assures the global public that it is dedicated to gender mainstreaming.....

The second of the intense morning's sessions then got underway. Four Syrian women now living in exile spoke about how personally distressing it was to see their country descend into violence. Two women described an effort they'd launched here in Geneva to bring Syrians of all backgrounds and political affiliations together over Syrian food,

using recipes from all regions of the country. No talk of politics, religion, or even of the conflict was allowed...the point was just to be together, to remind each other how much they shared as Syrians.

These Syrian women -- as women from any country would - have quite dissimilar understandings of what their society had been like before the outbreak of violence in 2011 - that is, before the Assad regime made military force its response to the non-violent pro-democracy public demonstrations calling on the government to reform. Some of these Syrian women, living now outside Syria, for instance, recalled a pre-war society in which they felt secure: "Women could walk at night in Damascus without any fear." Other women, by contrast, recalled that, while before 2011 there wasn't overt violence, there was systematic political repression aimed at anyone who dared to be critical of the government. So, even among this handful of women, there existed two quite different understandings of history and of "security."

One young Syrian woman, now in exile in France, gave an example of how the less visible violence had been transformed by 2012 into a more visible violence. "I had never been political. I was leading a pretty comfortable life. Then one day, after soldiers had started shooting civilians, I saw Assad on television laughing as the news of the killings was shown. That was it for me. I decided I had to do something." She joined a small group of women who were trying to provide the simplest forms of support to those families who had lost members to the violence. On Easter, she and a friend decided to distribute chocolate Easter eggs to children in these grieving families - "We wrote messages both from the Koran and from the Gospels on the eggs." But while on their rounds they were arrested by police for distributing the chocolate eggs and taken to a prison. "They put us in a cell next to a torture room, where we could hear other prisoners pleading to be killed rather than be subjected to more torture." Eventually, she was released and fled to Paris. Now she runs an on-line FM radio station for Syrians.

Just at this point - we were all very quiet - there was a commotion outside the glass wall of the room. Cheerful welcomes and much hugging. Syrian women from *inside* Syria had just managed to arrive! This was no small feat -- receiving international funding for the trip, getting through check points, obtaining visas....

In "Day 2, Part C," I'll report on what these women shared with us.

Geneva Blog - Still Tuesday, Jan. 21, 2014 – "Part C"

We'd taken a break for finger food lunch and coffee and just to pause so we could digest all that we'd been hearing. The 4 newly arrived Syrian women also got a chance to get their bearings.

We all reconvened. First was a short, but powerful talk by Shirin Ebadi, the fearless Iranian human right lawyer who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for her efforts. She speaks English, but asked if she could offer her thoughts to us in her native Farsi, with a

translator, so that she could say exactly what she meant. She began by apologizing to the Syrians present for herself and for all those Iranians – and she said there were many – who opposed the Iranian government’s current militarized interventions in the Syrian conflict (the Iranian government is a major backer of the Assad regime and directly supports the Lebanese-based Hezbollah militiamen’s cross-border interventions in Syria). Shirin then widened her message, energetically arguing that, time after time, external military interventions have worsened the violence endured by people inside the war-afflicted societies, while also shrinking the chances for a sustainable peace agreement. People crowded into the room broke into spontaneous applause when this part of Shirin’s talk was translated.

Without a break, we segued immediately to the next session. The four newly-arrived Syrian women took chairs in the inner semi circle, where they were joined by Madeleine Rees of WILPF and Lena Ad of Kvinna till Kvinna. I was asked to serve as moderator. Our task was to specify what were the particular obstacles to women civil society activists getting a place at the peace talk table. Madeline, with direct experience in Bosnia where she had served as Mary Robinson’s Special Representative for the UN High Commissioners for Human Rights, told us that she has repeatedly witnessed so many elite men’s dedication to the “medieval” narrative: “Only men with guns can bring peace.”

Madeleine urged each of us all subvert that conventional militarizing, masculinizing narrative everywhere we hear it. She pushed us to go further, to articulate an alternative and more realistic narrative: civil society activists, many of them women, bring to the table their knowledge of local conditions and their commitment to creating sustainable peace and meaningful security in ways that produce a more genuine security; it is these attributes and skills that has the best chance of producing an agreement one that fosters citizenship and political transparency.

Lena’s contribution underscored these points. She described Kvinna till Kvinna’s recent cross-national detailed study of the dynamics that today continue to favor masculinized peace negotiations. She reminded us that this was in spite of the UN Security Council’s members (including, of course, the US and Russia) in 2000 – 14 years ago - having voted to adopt UN Security Council Resolution 1325 On Women Peace and Security (what many women in the room refer to simply as “1325”). 1325 commits both the agencies of the UN and every UN member state to take actions that will insure that women are not just treated as “victims,” but are treated as serious players – that is, that women have an effective voice in all peace agreement processes, in all post-agreement transitional political arrangements, and in all on-going post-war state reforms and peace-building development. Thus it is in flagrant violation of their own formal commitments, Lena reminded us, that the key political players in so many of today’s peace processes and now this international Syrian process marginalize women civil society representatives.

The Syrian women who had just recently arrived then gave nuanced accounts of what women are experiencing but also what women activists are doing in the midst of the ever-escalating violence. With the support of Karama, a Cairo-based women’s rights group, some of them have formed the Syrian Women’s Forum for Peace. Mouna Ghanem,

trained as a public health professional, is among its co-founders. They have tried to bring together the scattered women's groups working locally inside of Syria. Mouna said that 1325 was beginning to become more familiar to many of those activists, who now saw it as giving their demands for inclusion in the peace talks international recognition. She noted that these women, many of them trained in law, social work, and medicine, have been working to deliver humanitarian aid, neighborhood by neighborhood, to document violations of human rights in the midst of the violence, to create micro-ceasefires allowing food and medical supplies to reach Syrians isolated by violence.

Rim Turkmani, the astrophysicist who had spoken earlier in the day, told us that doing this sort of work "on the ground" was really effected by specific local conditions. For instance, she explained, in one neighborhood of a larger city there might be 5,000 armed fighters, most locally recruited, surrounded by 20,000 civilians. In that instance, local people – many of whom personally know the male fighters amongst them – can wield significant influence. Under these conditions, local civil activists stood a good chance of creating a temporary cease fire.

By contrast, Rim explained, if the violence had escalated to a point where living has become intolerable, forcing thousands of residents to flee, then the fighters might number 5,000, but the local residents will have been reduced to, say, 2,000. Under those conditions, creating even a short-lived cease fire is unlikely.

Each of the four Syrian women were determined that women in Syria, no matter how difficult their immediate situations, should "not be passive." They wanted both younger women and older women to demand that they be taking part in all sorts of community decision-making, that they craft their own plans and visions for a future Syria.

Despite the now-spiraling sexual assaults and kidnapping of women – perpetrated by those warring men who see women as mere currency in their rivalries with other men – these Syrian women insist that Syrian women should not be imagined by themselves, by the international media and agencies, or by us, their listeners, as mere victims. Syrian women, in all their diversity, were people with a stake in the direction their country took; they were people with skills and knowledge. That is, Syrian women were *citizens*.

***Geneva Blog , Wednesday and Thursday, January 22 and 23, 2014
Days 3 and 4***

Back to drizzle after a lovely bit of blue above yesterday.

This morning's *International New York Times* is full of the news of the rocky, acrimonious start of the official Syrian Peace Talks up in the mountain resort of Montreux. NOT A SINGLE WOMAN is mentioned or quoted in the long article.

In fact, loads of women are actually outside the hall holding brightly colored banners calling for women to be meaningfully included in the talks. (You can go to Code Pink's

and WILPF's websites for news and photos).

Back down here in Geneva, yesterday (Wednesday) the 10 Syrian women civil society activists spent their day in meetings with UN officials and with officials of various governments. The Norwegians have been esp supportive, as have the British. Last week, WILPF's UN-based staff in its small but savvy NY office managed to facilitate a meeting of Syrian women activists with Samantha Power, the US delegate to the UN.

Really, the amount of persuading it is taking to pry open these Peace Talk doors is mind boggling. And, of course, every Syrian woman who is here in Geneva or in NY has had to have her travel funded by someone, has had to leave her home area and make the risky trip out of the country - and soon must try to get back home again. Nothing that they are doing is easy.

In all the discussions, these Syrian women activists are underscoring the importance of creating civil society *in* wartime. They remind us at every turn that there has not been a history of civil society in Syria. The Assad (Senior and Junior) regimes have systematically sucked all the air out of civic space. For 40 years to be “political” has been shrunken to mean solely to be part of, or complicit with the regime. To be anything other than supportive, complicit or passive is in the Assad regime’s view to be a “terrorist.” In this sense, Syrians have been, until recently, even more politically deprived than Egyptians. Even under Mubarak, Egyptian women's grass roots groups were allowed to exist so long as they labeled their fields of work "education" or "development." In January, 2014, however, Egyptian civil society is beginning to look more like Syria’s in so far as the currently ruling Egyptian military is defining all civic activism as “terrorism.”

Thinking about Syrian and Egyptian women activists’ daunting challenges as they try to plant the seeds of civil society convinces me all over again that one of the most globally damaging political consequences of Americans’ post-9/11 “War on Terror” discourse has been its sharpening an instrument of repression in the hands of autocratic regimes.

These challenges notwithstanding, Syrian women activists have created the beginnings of a civil society – citizens’ actions independent of the regime, independent of any armed group, independent of any party machine. They have done this by acting locally, by fulfilling civic needs that the government will not address and the armed groups either cannot or will not address.

Thus delivering food and medical supplies to displaced people within Syria, people (a majority today are women with their dependent children – which is quite different from the conventional “women and children”) forced to flee their homes because of violence, has become a principal space in which Syrian women can act as genuine citizens. It has not been only women who have been doing this work, but, the Syrian activists told us, most men have been conscripted by the government's military, have become fighters in the opposition, have gone into hiding, or have been wounded or killed. Thus it has been

women who, now in the fourth year of the war, have taken the lead in most Syrian civil society groups.

This is why the Syrian women going from government mission to government mission are calling for an independent delegation representing Syrian civil society to be at the formal negotiating table: if civil society is at the table, women will be authentically at the table.

UN and government officials resistant to civil society women activists being "at the table" are saying to the women who go to see them, "It's too early," or "You're not ready," or "You aren't organized," or "You don't have a plan to bring peace." The women who have made it here to Geneva this week counter: "We have built networks of women active locally. We are ready, in fact we are more prepared more for peace than most of the men at the table. And we do have a plan." The plan is a series of steps in order of priority. The first is a cease fire. The second is the withdrawal of all foreign fighters and the immediate ceasing of all imports of weapons. Both of these steps are intended to make the 3rd step possible: the delivery of humanitarian aid to the country's most desperate cities and towns. Beyond the delivery of aid, their plan calls for women to be represented in all post-conflict institution-building and for the prosecution of all acts of violence against women.

Several changes have marked the year-by-year unfolding of the Syrian conflict, and, the Syrian women activists say, each of these changes have been *gendered*. First, while women were prominent in the leadership of the early non-violent pro-democracy demonstrations in 2011, as the violence escalated, women's visibility receded. That is, as militarization has spread, so has the masculinization of Syrian political life. Many of the women pro-democracy leaders have had to flee abroad; those who have stayed in Syria have turned to less visible local humanitarian work, which too often is erroneously imagined to be outside of political life. Now in late 2013 and early 2014 as formal peace talks have begun, even as tenuous as they clearly are, Syrian activist women are again becoming more visibly political.

A second change, the Syrian women report, has been the transformations of the structures of Syrian families and of the Syrian economy. The spread of violence has produced more and more women-led households. But, just as women have become more relied upon to provide for the economic survival of families, their economic opportunities have shrunk. Many of the new economic opportunities available in wartime Syria have depended on exploiting, not resisting, the violence.

For instance, some male fighters are now paid for fighting, not much, but enough so they begin to see fighting as an economic activity. In addition, some Syrian local village leaders have begun to see armed check points as money spinners. So they have been creating armed check points across roads around their villages at which they collect fees from any passing vehicle. In this way, some people have begun to have a personal economic stake in the continuation of the armed conflict.

Third, Syrian women here told us, as the conflict has become more violent and as the number of masculinized armed groups – Syrian and foreign - have proliferated, the targeting of women has become more pronounced. Trafficking of women and girls, sexual assaults on women, forced early marriages of girls, the arrests and torture of women, the tightening of control of women for the sake of ideological goals - all have increased between mid-2011 and early 2014.

That is, “War” is not a static condition. Armed conflicts are dynamic. Those dynamics are gendered. Crafting a sustainable peace agreement – and building a secure and civic society – in 2014 presents a different set challenges than it did even in late 2012.

I’ve been lucky to be able to sit in on several smaller strategy meetings during these days in Geneva. The transnational feminist groups that are in daily contact with Syrian civil society activists provide them with official contacts, with media outlets for their analyses and plans, with funds for travel so they can meet with each other, with chances to trade experiences and strategies with women who've experienced other wars and other masculinized closed doors.

The women active in these transnational groups - WILPF, Code Pink, Women in Black, Women Living Under Muslim Law, Madre, Equality Now, Kamara (the Cairo-based women's rights group), ICAN (as well as US-based women’s peace groups such as WAND) - all are themselves in the process of constant reflection and learning, learning how to be supportive without being presumptuous, learning how to facilitate without becoming the "story" themselves. It is impressive to watch this on-going alliance-making among feminists in the most daunting of political environments.

Geneva Blog , Friday, January 24, 2014
Day 5 – last but not final

Hi again to everyone --- thanks for your nice responses. It's been really helpful thinking of each of you as I try to piece together all that I'm trying to absorb here in Geneva.

Today is Friday, Jan. 24. On the front page of the *International New York Times* (which I still call the “International Herald Trib”!) there is a photo of a Syrian woman standing in the middle of a rubble-strewn street in Aleppo. She has spontaneously put her hand up to cover mouth as bombs have just fallen. As I looked at her, I thought: Who is representing you here at the Geneva Peace Talks?

As so often happens in the mainstream media (as versus online and print reports by feminist researchers and journalists), a woman is made the subject of a news photo, with a brief caption underneath, but then she - and in fact virtually all women - vanish when the full news article is written. This is what happened today. The *Times* inside story about the "scramble" to keep the faltering peace talks alive was a story about men, rival men, mediating official men, but all men – Lakhdar Brahimi, the UN envoy, John Kerry, the US Secretary of State, Sergei Lavrov, Russia’s Foreign Minister, the men of the

Opposition, the men of Assad's government, the men of the Iranian, Saudi, Turkish and Qatari governments, the officers and conscripts in the Assad government military, the commanders and fighters for the Syrian pro-anti Assad militias, the commanders and fighters for the foreign Islamist militias....

At meetings yesterday, Syrian women civil society activists and their transnational feminist supporters, however, remained engaged. The 10 Syrian women from inside Syria, women active in civil society groups "on the ground," kept up their rounds of meetings with various state delegations, with the EU foreign minister Catherine Ashton, with staff of UN Women and with these independent "INGO's" (the lingo for international non-governmental organizations, such as WILPF, ICAN, Kvinna till Kvinna and other feminist groups).

But it is not clear that simply doing these rounds of embassy visits is proving very useful. No government official offered to do anything. They did not expend any of their own political currency. They didn't even offer to get them passes so they could get inside the building. Their meetings with these ten Syrian women representatives may just allow these governments to claim that they "care" about Syrian women without actually doing anything to insure that their important voices - their knowledge, their peace strategies - are inside the peace talk negotiating room.

One puzzle I heard voiced yesterday was why the UN Women staff here are setting their political sights so low, why are they recommending that the Syrian women push at most for "observer" status in the talks --- to listen but not talk? Admittedly, they don't even have that now, but why start with such a modest demand? Perhaps the UN Women staff are also just "ticking the box"? That is, are they, like their counterparts in the various embassies just eager to be able to say that they were "supportive" of the Syrian women, without actually rocking any diplomatic boats - and thus without actually altering the structure of the official peace talks? A puzzle.

But the feminist strategists working with the Syrian women are certainly not setting their sights low. In all the conversations yesterday, they worked on plans to get the Syrian women's voices, ideas, knowledge and proposals into the room.

For instance, one of the plans crafted by one of Syrian civil society networks would implement regional ceasefires with the aim of delivering desperately need humanitarian aid -- food and medicine. They say that all of Syria is not an active fighting zone. The country really is made up today of violent war zones (for instance Aleppo, where the Assad Air Force is bombing civilian areas), but also areas - even particular neighborhoods of cities such as Homs and Damascus - where there is now a precarious peace.

For instance, on the coast, there is currently little open fighting, but there has been an influx of people from other regions fleeing to the coast in the aftermath of violence in their own home regions. The coastal region is where many Syrians who identify as Alawite (the group that Assad's governing elite draws upon for its male personnel), but it

has been women from this coastal community who have taken the initiative to actively set up support systems for the incoming displaced people, a majority women with their dependent children, even though outsiders would see those people as "Sunni."

The Syrian woman presenting this proposed region-by-region peace plan yesterday - from the pro-civil society group Madani - drew a diagram on a white board (around the table there were 13 of us -- British, Northern Irish, Turkish, Swedish, American, Norwegian – today it was 8 Macs, 2 pcs). She stressed that in these unstable but not openly violent areas such as along the coast and certain neighborhoods of Homs and Damascus, what was immediately called for was NOT armed UN peacekeeping soldiers. Rather, what was needed there were locally designated civilian peace monitors - to be recognized by all sides - to oversee the bringing in of aid. In addition, there could be external and locally trained mediators, who would spot rising tensions and intervene to address them before they erupted into open violence.

The other point that was emphasized in yesterday's strategy meetings was that any and all civil society/women representatives needed to put into place clear "feed back" mechanisms. One of the groups that has conducted surveys among Syrians doing peace work inside country - the Center for Civil Society and Democracy in Syria (CCSDS) - has found that the people who were most trusted by Syrians were "those who came and asked us what we thought, then went off and DID something about that, and THEN returned and told us what they had done and asked us for our responses to that."

All the women with experience not only in Syria, but in Northern Ireland, Somalia, and Bosnia, emphasized that creating the conditions for ceasefires and maintaining them, as well as keeping precarious areas back from the brink of violence is itself peace-building. That is, we shouldn't imagine that this hard, smart work in the midst of war's violence and dislocation to be simply preliminary to peace; it itself *is* peace-building. And, of course, right now it is women who are developing those crucial peace-building skills and crafting these important political concepts.

So, I head for the airport in an hour with all these new ideas and images in my head. But the story isn't over. Here in Geneva, feminists from independent transnational groups and Syrian women representing civil society groups inside Syria are still meeting, still strategizing, still pressing governments, opposition leaders, and the UN to make the peace talks more realistic and more potentially productive by bringing Syrian women's voices and ideas to the table.

END