

The IXVI Biennial Women in Black Conference
Wars against Women and Women against Wars
A Summary Report

Summary Report of the Workshop November 17, 18 and 19

The World Court of Women against War, for Peace set the context for the Conference Wars against Women and Women against Wars spread over two days from 17 November – 19 November 2015 and three major workshops - Workshop one: In Times of War; Workshop two: In Times of War and Peace and Workshop three: In Times of Peace.

15 November 2015
The Inaugural

The rains which began on 15 November and continued for the three days of the Conference seemed like it too was welcoming the participants to Vimochana's space in Vemgal, Kolar - a space that offers shelter to women survivors of violence. The women who gathered for the Conference came from all over the world, from diverse cultures and political background and of varied ages but all working towards a world free from wars and for peace.

The space resounded with the voices of women as they shared their experiences, ideas and hope; voices reflecting the diversity of our understandings, voices of solidarity, all creating a convivial space for dialogue and discussion.

As one participant remarked just like the rains that soak the earth sprouting new seeds so too she hoped that the Conference would give birth to more and more Women in Black movements.

Seventy international participants from sixteen countries and over a fifty from other parts of the country and Bangalore participated in the five day event.

Day one
17 November , 2015
Workshop one: In Times of War

This first workshop focused on current flashpoints of war in different parts of the world and regions – Armenia, Afghanistan, Palestine, North East India, Kashmir, Sri Lanka and feminist alternatives to the ISIS state.

What is offered here are some of the country specific key issues that were discussed in each of these simultaneous small group workshops.

- While the flashpoint of war in Armenia was it's contentious issue of border disputes with Azerbaijan, the war against women took specific forms such as the gender related laws engendering a backlash against women, domestic violence, female foeticide, emotional and mental trauma of being women headed households due to migration of men , lack of education of women despite laws that provide for them and the non existence of a work culture of women, the compulsory conscription of men into the army and the

resultant suicides for which the State takes no responsibility has all but added to the problems of women in Armenia. However, the younger generation of women are questioning this oppressive culture and attempting to create spaces for women to be free.

- The small group on flashpoint of war in Afghanistan looked and injustice, inequality and violence against women and they strongly felt that the position of women in Afghanistan after the US invasion fourteen years ago has only worsened where women live in a state of terror with all freedoms abdicated and the convention on elimination of violence against women has remained on paper. The group felt that the US has been primarily responsible for this as it has supported Islamic fundamentalism directly and indirectly.

A strong call/demand that emerged from the group was

Don't send your beloved to the war of Afghanistan. Do not support the Government but support the people

- The group on flashpoint of war in Palestine discussed how difficult it was to lead a normal life in the context of a continued state of siege. They spoke about the factor of “normalization” which prevents Palestinians from working with Israeli peace activists as if the war did not exist. That they were not equals for one is the occupier and the other occupied. And therefore, the standard of living and opportunities are very different. People in Gaza are enclosed in a jail with not many rights and resources. In the occupied territories settlements are expanding and Palestinian occupied territories are shrinking. The Palestinians are harassed at check points making it impossible for them to function; they spoke about the importance of not erasing the past, of the right of return and citizenship; The Women in Black Israel shared that it is not easy anymore to stand on the streets in solidarity with Palestine with the call to end the occupation as the sense of victimhood of Israel was strong which refuses to see the pain of others. However, they felt that we need to work on recognizing pain and to accept each other's pain; to work on education, truth and healing, citizenship and equal rights. To work together for inner strength and forgiveness. And more importantly the group reaffirmed that nonviolent resistance was the only solution for war and to build a culture of peace.

Some points on what perhaps could be the future focus was drawn out: to support each other as Women in Black; to educate the youth in Israel; continue to think and work for a Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone mandated by the UN General Assembly; a proposal/suggestion to hold a Court of Women in Jerusalem to bring about change in young people's minds.

- Repressive State violence against the people of Northeast, militarization and rape formed the focus points of discussion in flashpoints of war in Northeast India. The Naga women who initiated the discussion felt that while the women's movement in the Northeast resembled the women's movement all over with their diversity and sameness, what marked out the Northeast from

other states was the draconian Armed Forces Special Powers Act which gives impunity to the military when they rape and murder women. The Naga mothers have struggled for two decades to repeal the Act but with no success. While they continue to struggle on this front, they and in particular the Naga women have been successful in becoming integral to the peace processes of negotiations and agreements between the militant groups and the Government of India.

- The discussions in the workshop flashpoints of war in Kashmir was initiated by tracing the current situation in Kashmir to the time of Partition of India in 1947 when the Indian nation came into being with the unification or merging of the different states of pre independent India.

Kashmir which was given the choice of joining India or Pakistan or having its own state without joining either of the two joined India with the promise of their Right to Self Determination enshrined in Article 370 has been deferred until today. The discussants spoke of the state violence being perpetrated on innocent civilians and the harassment at the hands of the paramilitary forces which they felt has been the primary cause for the growing militancy in Kashmir. And the women have been victims of rape and other indignities at the hands of the army and paramilitary forces - crimes committed with impunity.

The plight of women who were half widows, so called as they did not know if their husbands who had been picked up for interrogation by paramilitary forces and later disappeared were alive or dead, was also discussed. The violence against women was not only a direct consequence of state violence but also to the internalization of that violence.

- The last workshop Exploring feminist alternatives to militarism was problematic as much as reflective as it introspected questions such as how can we have the Kurdish women who have women armed units in Syria and Iraq as part of the Women in Black movement which is an antimilitary movement? But the Kurdish women have been at the forefront of rescuing Yezidi and other minority women who have been captured, enslaved and raped or forced into marriage by the Islamic State. And so how can we judge them who have taken up arms to defend themselves and other women. Would we do any differently if we faced armed men who wanted to rape and kill us, or our families?

Exploring the root causes of violence, the participants felt that the borders drawn on the map by European powers (for example, around Israel/Palestine, Afghanistan, Syria, Iran, Iran, Turkey) have created unstable regions and oppressed peoples and the Islamic State was armed by western powers and they were among the many fundamentalist groups in the world that was responding to economic and globalization policies imposed by the west on rest of the world. Militarism which goes hand in hand with patriarchy and of which women become victims do not find their experiences heard either as victims or as active agents of resistance to that violence.

17 November, 2015

Workshop two: In Times of War and Peace

This thematic workshop addressed conceptual issues such as democracy and gendered etiology of crimes as well as issues of virtual gender violence, climate change, nuclear weapons which are creating newer contexts for war and violence.

Workshop on gendered etiology of war crimes explored the root causes for crimes that were committed in the name of hate and against the perceived other. The presenters explained the theory of hate crimes as being built on differences and chalked out the typology of perpetrators as those who feel a sense of deprivation; those who commit it in defence; those who do it for revenge and out of a lack of self worth; and those who build up anger within and lash out but the striking and common aspect was the ordinariness of those who committed these crimes.

Gender, ethnicity and racism emerged as burning issues and two groups were formed to discuss around these issues. While the group on gender felt that it was important to recognize and respect differences and celebrate heterogeneity, the group on ethnicity and racism felt that identities are built upon oppressing the identity of the other for eg the Jewish identity is preserved by oppressing the Palestinian identity.

Workshop on Democracy and Peace looked at the idea of Democracy in our times which has become antithetical to peace particularly in the context of the global south.

It attempted to introspect both the idea of democracy and of peace which is today tied to a notion of market wherein powerful global nation states create and sustain conditions of conflict to have a monopoly over a region's natural resources, armed warfare the means to keep an entire country and its people in a state of flux.

The questions that were thrown open for discussion were should we refind other notions of governance, perspectives of democracy that are relevant to each region and country; is democracy possible in the context of global capitalism and global terror, gross inequalities between and within nation-states? What are the yardsticks that we need to measure democracy? to challenge/critically look at ideas of nation, geographical boundaries, citizenship, security, rights and justice that are intrinsically intertwined with the notion of democracy; to move beyond the idea of Peace which implies a cessation of war? Is it possible to differentiate state terror from wars of terror waged in the name of religion, protecting ones land and resources?

Are there other notions, ways to democracy? Was another question that was seriously debated. In an idea of Democracy which is based on the principle of majority and minority, it is the majority that holds sway and non inclusiveness, the casualty. But that does not mean that other ideas do not exist which was illustrated with examples of self governance from small villages in India.

Secondly, democracy embedded in the idea of the nation equates the majority rights with collective rights and assumes that what is good for the majority is good for all, ignoring that this operates within the framework of a market. However, citing the example of the Zapatista movement wherein their structures of a collective dismisses the ideas of hierarchy which in turn displaces the idea of power that is based on binaries. Their core vision Asking, We Walk helps displace the binaries as fixed

structures of knowledge and instead turns to knowledges as gathered from amongst us, within and around us.

Workshop on Climate Change and War focused on the key arguments of Rosalie Bertell wherein she links militarization to Climate Destabilization connecting the many facets of the abuse of the earth to the military: toxic bases, nuclear testing, huge consumption of fossil fuel, the diversion of research funding that should be directed toward sustainability, the development of toxic chemicals like Agent Orange, which then get repackaged as commercial agricultural pesticides, to name just a few. Rosalie also exposes the way “earth systems” themselves are being instrumentalised as weapons and brings together evidence to show that secret geo-engineering projects have been and are being used to manipulate the complex meteorological and geological life support systems of the planet, with rampant disregard for, and ignorance of, both immediate and lasting consequences. Military systems and militarization, with their addiction to death, destruction, and market sovereignty, are perhaps the greatest contributor to climate destabilization. She argues that militaries are designed to spread terror and chaos and allows leaders to push through repressive, murderous policies while populations are too emotionally and physically traumatized to resist.

Against this backdrop, the participants pointed out that climate talks which have been held in Kyoto, Copenhagen, Mexico, Durban and USA have failed because they have been between nation states and cited examples of Nigeria where multi national companies like Shell were creating pollution with their fossil fuel development as the local people have no say in it or Israel where its nuclear reactor had contaminated the water in Gaza leading to cancer reaffirming the point that militarisation render ecosystems dysfunctional.

Workshop on Feminist approaches to Ban Nuclear Weapons explored the connections between nuclear energy and nuclear weapons. The participants exploded the myth that Nuclear energy which is promoted as cheap, clean and safe was in reality highly toxic from the process of mining uranium, its raw material to running it and disposing waste. And in this so called peaceful nuclear energy cycle, many indigenous communities have found themselves dispossessed, bombed and poisoned, their toxic legacy effecting generations; and nuclear weapons are the outcomes of these nuclear energy processes as we have witnessed all over the world.

Therefore we need to use international humanitarian laws to eliminate weapons and lobby with countries that do not possess nuclear weapons to get them banned.

At the same time to explore other options for producing energy from localized and renewable energy sources like wind and water that are safe and clean.

The urgent need among Women in Black members to exchange information regarding campaigns was expressed.

The next two Workshops on Culture of Violence and the Violence of Culture and Virtual Gender Violence was basically an experience sharing workshop. In the first, the participants discussed how culture has interplayed in transforming violence across generations and the dominant ideology of market and consumerism has made inroads into cultures exacerbating the violence on women. And if we need to

transform this culture of violence on women, we need then to focus on engaging in a dialogue with men.

The second workshop looked at newer forms of violence, virtual violence that was being perpetrated on women by technology. While one can argue that Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) are enabling technologies, one should not forget that these ICTs have their roots in histories of war and violence. For most of the ICTs used now and earlier originated in and supported by the Department of Defence of the Federal government of USA. And further, the early computers were utilized extensively during the second world war, thereby inherently making them instruments of violence.

The discussions in the workshop centred around the forms of violence such as posting sexual comments, revenge porn, blackmail, stalking as also on the perpetrators who may be strangers or former, estranged or current partners, boyfriends or husbands or others they know and domestic violence victims are among the most vulnerable groups to traditional stalking. As in other types of violence against women, cyber stalking is about power relations, intimidation and establishing control.

The participants felt that although cyber fraud and cyber crimes are investigated gender violence in cyber space remains largely unidentified.

Day two

18 November, 2015

Workshop three: In Times of Peace

The smaller group discussion in this workshop looked at women's contribution to building peaceful societies.

Workshop on Mediators Beyond Borders looked at how women can be empowered to effectively engage in peace processes; How can women make use of UN Resolution 1325 which calls for increased participation of women at all levels of decision making, peace negotiations and in mechanisms for the prevention and management of conflict?

It was felt that we need to look at a multidisciplinary of peace building efforts as not all conflicts can be mediated in the same way and some may never be mediated. However, a key aspect to mediation and intervention was the creation of an environment of safety and trust. Religious groups, ethnic communities respond creatively when there is trust and even if the process seem to take long, the changes that ultimately occur are sustainable and enduring.

The workshop concluded with an important question – why should love stop at the borders?

Workshop on Feminism, Militarism and Militarisation looked at different institutions such as the family, education, public space and media by which militarization seeps into our minds. They made the following demands:

- For decades western governments have intervened in and occupied different regions of the world, on the pretext of peace, human rights and women's rights. We denounce their hypocrisy and find them guilty of war crimes.
- Western governments have involved our people in wars that we don't support in Afghanistan, Libya, Iraq and Syria.
- Our governments have stolen the voices of women, and have spoken and acted in our name. we don't recognize these genocidal governments and we don't support their policies of exploitation and extermination, and we actively oppose them.
- We are creating networks of resistance with our sisters from these countries across borders, economic interests and laws
- Stopping these wars is crucial for us and for the world

The last Workshop on Lesbians in the Peace and Justice Movements

The lesbian workshop did not happen as it was planned. The organizers had invited community members to a general workshop on sexual minorities and the facilitators of the lesbian workshop agreed to change the focus. The workshop opened with a statement by the lesbian facilitators that it is really important to us that we recognize the central role lesbians have played and continue to play in Women In Black. We do not want our culture, herstory, and oppression to be forgotten or erased. We need to gather as lesbians to learn from each other, gain support, and share the unique experience of being lesbians in patriarchal society. We feel it is important that we remain visible as we also find ways to support each other in the LGBTQI – Gender Fluid communities. Therefore, we suggest that at future WIB gatherings there be a lesbian workshop and perhaps a second workshop on LGBTQI concerns.

began with putting forth a few questions for discussion

- How do you identify in terms of gender and sexual identity
- Tell one short story – an example what it is like to be LGBTIQ in your world, like in your family and political work?
- What was your response if you have met or worked with someone LGBTIQ
- How can we be allies?
- What are the strengths you get from your gender and sexual identity?

The participants shared their experiences of their coming out process, acceptance from family, non-acceptance, the brutality of violence, from lack of support systems to creating support systems. The participants identified as being lesbian, Trans Man, Gender Fluid to Cis Gender to Queer to Bi-sexual.

The group discussed narratives of pain, brutal violence and resistance.

There were also narratives of how intersectionalities made the experiences of oppression and exclusion more pronounced. For eg the intersectionality of being a transgender dalit and that of a transgender homosexual are dealt with grave oppression

The participants emphasized the fact that we need to work together. We need to build allies as we struggle against an unjust world . Our struggle should not be limited to only LGBTIQ issues but to larger issues . As Audre Lorde said there is no such thing as a single issue struggle because we don't lead single issue lives.

The group felt that not only binaries of male and females and homosexuals and heterosexuals were the larger order of the society but these binaries crept into, and arrested the struggle to get acceptance and tolerance of gender identities themselves. The binaries had become so engrained that it was impossible to explore and discover for oneself if they were LGBT, and most were caught in confusion and existential crisis. **This appears to be one person's opinion and not what happened at the workshop.**

The group finally deliberated on the strengths and positive emotions associated with sexual and gender identity such as the ability to empathise with varied oppression, growing self esteem which led to greater solidarity, pride and community belongingness, freedom to express and enhancement of capabilities, social activism and advocacy and greater inclination to demand social justice of all kinds.

The workshop ended with the participants laughing like witches and all leaving for Bangalore to gather for the Women in Black vigil.

Women in Black Vigil
Wars against Women and Women against Wars
Bangalore

The second day of the conference culminated in the Women in Black vigil on M G Road where we stood wearing black, holding posters and placards of resistance while some weaving through the busy traffic distributed pamphlets and some daring to stand on the Zebra crossing with their placards aloft.

Poetry, music and dance resonated on the pavements even as the candles we held shed light on the culture of violence pervading our world.

Following the three hour protest, we gathered at the office of Vimochana where the international participants were introduced to the work and vision of Vimochana and Cieds Collective. Many of the core group members and the young interns and volunteers shared their organizations work too.

Day three
19 November, 2015
Plenary: The way forward

It is true that when women support each other, incredible things happen. On 19 November 19 2015, the day began with a beautiful poem by Nandhini of the Swaraj Network, which spoke of the power of one's fight against oppression. Just like birds build their nests, each one of us have to start from scratch and put the pieces

together to make it successful. The meeting progressed onto seeking suggestions from the women on how to improve the entire movement's perspective and vision.

It was put forth that though the Occupation of Palestine by Israel is of great concern, there are many other conflict zones that require attention too. The members articulated their concerns and offered suggestions

- Shalom from France stated her concern on the country's enormous military budget and the need to demand a different foreign policy.
- Marseille stated that she had learnt from the entire conference the importance of patience-of how each one plants the seeds and hopes for the monsoons to make them grow and bloom into flowers of peace and joy. However, Haifa from South Africa improvised the statement by saying from the conference, the lesson she was going to take back was the energy to make it rain, and not merely wait.
- The women from Netherlands laid emphasis on the need to involve the youth into the movement.
- The women from Spain noted that there had been an immense quality jump in this encounter and the importance of continuous improvement-particularly in trainings were emphasized.
- Liz, from U.K was pleased at how the entire event had not just excited her eyes, but also her heart and was amazed at the emotions it had brought out. She stressed the need to use resolution 1325 of the U.N. more in countries of conflict.
- Radha, from Nepal suggested that the movement discuss the challenges and obstacles and address them so as to resolve the gaps that exist in our understanding.
- Eman Khammas, an Iraqi human rights activist showed her appreciation towards organizing the entire event. However, she laid down her concern with regards to the women in black brochures which introduces it as having been started in Israel-because of which one cannot go to Iraqi and Arab organizations and ask them to join in support of the movement. This was debated over.
- Shaheen, from India suggested the formation of a woman's unity centre where one could discuss online the various issues of concern, and perhaps have an annual convention of women-beyond just those involved in the women in black. Further, she suggested the idea of a common minimum program.
- Lisa Majaj from Palestine, apart from expressing her gratitude towards the entire program, discussed the issue of normalization and raised the question as to whether peace is an end in itself or something more that comes as incidental to the structural changes that we strive for.
- Elahe Amani from Iran/USA shared her ideas to involve younger women into the movement-one of them being the ability to accept and encourage leadership of younger women. The importance of trust and believing in the creativity and the way the younger people see the world was brought out. Apart from this, she also suggested the formation of a face book group of all

the people involved in this conference of 2015 to promote further interaction.

- The women from Armenia further added to this stating that participation of women is integral to the country's development process.
- Nandini from India, thereafter put forth her concerns. She stated that the movement should challenge global hegemony in the sense that it should influence global women to stop war of all kinds. It must launch a campaign against societal and cultural norms. In cases of rape, the focus should be to help the woman out of the situation and heal rather than being excluded and suffer the stigma and discrimination.
- Concha from Madrid, Spain addressed the issue of Nato's military base in Spain and its involvement in the Syrian war. She drew attention to the fact that with the excuse of security against conflicts, there are a number of injustices being done all over and the movement should devise a strategy to oppose the same. Moreover, a statement should be made to each one's respective governments of their guilt and it should be shared with the government at all levels.
- Rebecca from the U.K. expressed her concern that the movement has not dealt enough about the support needed by the women who have stood up for other women facing violence-but have been subsequently targeted. The issue of how human rights defenders get marginalized and silenced should be dealt with more seriously.

After much discussion it was agreed that we should continue the meetings every two years and perhaps in between organize continental encounters if necessary. Many of the participants suggested Tunisia as the venue for the next gathering to be held in 2017 but Corinne proposed that it be held in South Africa and the subsequent one in Tunisia which was finally accepted.

It was clear at the end of the Conference that all of us were enriched by our interaction and dialogue as we gained new friends and renewed old friendships.

This report was made possible with the support and contribution of the participants, core group members of the Women in Black (Bangalore) and the young interns to Vimochana in particular Salomi, Beni, Samira and Sanaaya who took copious notes which helped to shape the report with clarity.

To them we offer our deepest thanks