Ukrainian Feminists under Western Eyes

written by Elisa Moros | May 9, 2022



> "I define solidarity in terms of mutuality, accountability, and the recognition of common interests as the basis for relationships among diverse communities. Rather than assuming an enforced commonality of oppression, the practice of solidarity foregrounds communities of people who have chosen to work and fight together. Diversity and difference are central values here—to be acknowledged and respected, not erased in the building of alliances. Jodi Dean (1996) develops a notion of 'reflective solidarity' that I find particularly useful. She argues that reflective solidarity is crafted by an interaction involving three persons: 'I ask you to stand by me over and against a third.' This involves thematizing the third voice 'to reconstruct solidarity as an inclusive ideal,' rather than as an 'us vs. them' notion. Dean's notion of a communicative, in-process understanding of the 'we' is useful, given that solidarity is always an achievement, the result of active struggle to construct the universal on the basis of particulars/differences. It is the praxis-oriented, active political struggle embodied in this notion of solidarity that is important to my thinking—and the reason I prefer to focus attention on solidarity rather than on the concept of 'sisterhood.'"[1]
>
> — Chandra Tapade Mohanty

When Kurdish feminists challenge Western pacifist feminists

Several feminist scholars (Dirik, Tank, Şimşek and Jongerden, etc.) have denounced the Western media's orientalist fascination with Kurdish women fighters. These authors show how the Western media portray Kurdish women as symbols of Western liberation in the East, which is in turn portrayed as barbaric. This Western-centric portrait has the purpose and effect of silencing Kurdish women whose political ideas[2] are never relayed. And for good reason, for if they were, the narrative carried by the Western media would be challenged and invalidated.

Kurdish feminist Dilar Dirik has also questioned the role of Western feminism in this orientalist discursive construction of Kurdish women fighters:

> "Some western feminists questioned its legitimacy and dismissed it as militarism or co-optation by political groups. Western media narratives have portrayed this struggle in a de-politisized, exotic way, or by making generalized assumptions about women's 'natural' disinclination to violence. The media reporting was dominated by a male gaze, but this was partly due to feminists' refusal to engage with this relevant topic. One cannot help but think that one of the reasons for this hostility may be the fact that militant women are taking matters into their own hands impairs western feminists' ability to speak on behalf of women in the Middle East, projected as helpless victims."

In her article "Feminist pacifism or passive-ism?," she denounces the inability of a naively pacifist feminism to distinguish between violence as oppression and violence as an act of resistance or self-

defense:

> "Unlike violence which aims to subjugate the 'other,' self-defense is a complete dedication and responsibility to life. To exist means to resist. And in order to exist meaningfully and freely, one must be politically autonomous. Put bluntly, in an international system of sexual and racial violence, legitimized by capitalist nation-states, the cry for non-violence is a luxury for those in privileged positions of relative safety, believing that they will never end up in a situation where violence will become necessary to survive. While theoretically sound, pacifism does not speak to the reality of masses of women and thus assumes a rather elitist first world character."

Indeed, it seems to me that the experience of Kurdish feminists challenges — at least partially — the canonical feminist antimilitarist theory. Feminist antimilitarism has emerged from the experience of many women and feminist activists in a wide range of peace movements around the world. However, feminist antimilitarism cannot ignore the experiences of those women and feminists advocating for armed struggle. When these experiences challenge the feminist antimilitarist theoretical framework, this framework needs to be updated by these experiences. It is not about invalidating the contributions of antimilitarist feminism, but rather about enriching them with new experiences coming from different positionalities.

In 2015, one of the leading thinkers of Feminist antimilitarism, Cyhthia Cockburn, interviewed two anti-militarist feminists, members of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) who had lived under Nazism. She confronted them with what she calls the 'pacifist dilemma' by asking them whether they would invite Kurdish women fighters to lay down their arms in the name of pacifism. The interviewees replied:

> "'I don't think so. Sitting here safely outside the war zone, we should understand them, not condemn them. To resist is a human right. However, in the long run we should not accept that militarism is the only response. We should seriously begin to build peacemaking mechanisms.'
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> "As a Wilpfer I would like to speak with the *peshmerga*[3] women, hear what they say. Fascism is so dirty. It's like an octopus, getting its tentacles into society, its racist idea of the superiority of one kind of person over another. I might well agree, and say to the Kurdish women, 'Yes, you have to fight.' But, perhaps when it's over, they themselves might look back on their campaign and say, 'That was not the way to do it'."

I share with these women the following ideas:

1. our role from outside the war zone is to support, not condemn, women and feminist fighters;
2. we must always listen to what the people concerned have to say;
3. supporting women around the world in their struggles, including military struggles, is not incompatible with fighting, in a broader and longer-term context, for the demilitarization of the world.

Can the Ukrainian feminists speak?

I recently had a discussion with a Ukrainian feminist who has been involved for a long time in feminist activism and is now a refugee in a Western European country. She told me that she finds it difficult to speak openly about political — and particularly gender — issues existing in Ukraine because she is under the impression that the support of the western feminists and leftists is conditional. In their view, Ukrainian society would have to be perfect — and thus free of contradictions — in order to deserve the full right to fight against the Russian invasion. Faced with this Western injunction, she, like many other women, feels obliged to choose between speaking out

on gender issues in Ukraine and seeking support for the Ukrainian resistance from leftists and feminists worldwide. Indeed, feminist injunctions that force women to choose between feminism and their other struggles often result in driving women away from feminism. This is a recurring problem of Western feminism that counter-hegemonic feminists have repeatedly pointed out.

Yet feminist analysis and activism remain necessary in Ukraine, as everywhere else. In the feminist Collective of the European Network of Solidarity with Ukraine, I have the pleasure to work with feminists involved in grassroots activism in Ukraine. They report that most of Ukrainian society — including many Ukrainian women — is either oblivious or suspicious of feminism, and this situation has worsened with the war. Feminist grassroots initiatives are facing financial difficulties as well as the hostility of landlords when trying to find a space for carrying out their activism. Viktoriia Pigul, a Ukrainian anticapitalist feminist comrade, drawing on several testimonies from Ukrainian women and children, has reported on the multiple forms of violence they are suffering. As is widely known by now, over the past few weeks, a lot of women and children have been brutalized and raped by Russian soldiers. Many of them are helpless. Many of them escape the war by fleeing to Poland, unaware that abortion in Poland — unlike in Ukraine — is banned by the law. In Poland, they are often exposed to new kinds of abuse by men. In this context, feminist activism in Ukraine is more essential now than ever.

Olena Lyubchenko has recently published a very rich analysis, essential reading, in which she shows how the militarization of Ukraine in recent years has been linked to austerity measures that have shifted the burden of resistance against Russian aggression onto women at the household level, while at the same time preparing the state for a highly unequal process of 'Euro-Atlantic' integration:

> "Militarization, austerity, and aggression in this context act as processes of dispossession and primitive accumulation. They 'generate global reserves of labor-power whose cross-border movements are at the heart of the worldwide production and reproduction of capital and labor.' In this way, racialized citizenship reproduces precarity and exclusion for some and security and inclusion for others, just as the Ukrainian working class's historical differentiation within global capitalism is being rewritten and instrumentalized."

Just as Dilar Dirik has denounced the instrumentalization of Kurdish women fighters in the Western media, Olena Lyubchenko denounces in this article the instrumentalization of Ukrainian resistance in Western media and institutional discourses that portray Ukrainians as heroes fighting a war "for Europe."[4] In this context, and still in continuity with Dilar Dirik's critique, it seems essential to question the role of Western feminism (and more broadly of the Western left) in this instrumentalization.

A transnational pacifist feminist manifesto was signed a few weeks ago by 150 prominent feminists from Europe and the Americas, without a single Ukrainian or post-Soviet European feminist among the signatories. Indeed, some Western feminists, close to Ukrainian feminists, refused to sign it. This manifesto reproduces the dominant geopolitical approach according to which the great imperialist powers are the only actors of history. It thus ignores the multi-scale reality and the agency of multiple actors highlighted by the feminist critique of geopolitics. It reduces Putin's war against Ukraine to a simple inter-imperialist conflict, thus erasing the agency of all Ukrainians. Only one line out of more than thirty is devoted to Ukrainians:

> "We are with the people of Ukraine who want to restore peace in their lives and demand a ceasefire."

This is a good example of how, in one sentence, to reduce 44 million people to the cliché of a passive

victim who needs, once again, to be rescued by the West. Ukrainians, women and men who are actively and militarily resisting the aggression that has been imposed upon them, are of no interest to Western feminist pacifists, just as they are of no interest to their male Western leftist friends. It seems that Ukrainians deserve our solidarity as victims, but not as resistance fighters. This caricaturing of Ukrainians as passive victims of NATO or European instrumentalization is similar to the Western media portrayal of Ukrainians as "European heroes." Both discourses erase the political voices and wills of Ukrainians. In fact, many Ukrainian men and women are determined to resist, including by armed struggle. This determination is not imposed by Zelensky or NATO, as shown by the strong involvement of all sectors of Ukrainian society in the resistance.

While the positions of Western feminists and leftists on issues such as arm supply are unlikely to have an impact on the decisions of Western policy makers, they do have a real impact on Ukrainian feminists and leftists. Indeed, abandoning (in some cases opposing) the Ukrainian resistance has the effect of weakening our Ukrainian comrades within the resistance, and undermining their ability to carry forward an emancipatory political project for all the people of Ukraine.

For a dialogical internationalist feminist practice

The Ukrainian resistance is far from perfect and is not free of contradictions. It is riven by conflicts of class, gender, and race, as are all our societies. Ukrainian women are experiencing war, aggression, torture, and mass rape by Russian troops, as well as continuing to suffer the violence they suffered before the war from Ukrainian men and the state. Moreover, the war context reinforces state authoritarianism as well as the sexual division of labor (things like male-only military conscription, reassignment of women to social reproduction work, etc.). The reinforcement of gender relations gives power over women to men and the State while women in turn are disempowered and become more vulnerable and exposed to all kinds of violence. In this context, anti-capitalist feminists, caught up in this intricate multi-scale reality, are struggling with their fellow Ukrainians against the Russian invader while continuing to struggle against part of their own fellow Ukrainians: against Government's neoliberal policies and employers' attacks, against sexist, racist or LGBTphobic violence, etc.

Struggling simultaneously 'with and against' can only be incomprehensible to the minority of people who have the privilege of having only one enemy, or engaging only on one front. Counter-hegemonic feminists have taught us that positionality is central to any feminist politics. To take but one example, the Combahee River Collective, one of the most important Black lesbian feminist collectives in feminist history, rejected lesbian separatism as being both analytically and strategically inoperative for Black women who cannot afford the luxury of disassociating themselves from Black men in their common struggle against racism. Barbara Smith goes so far as to say:

> "So seldom is separatism involved in making real political change, affecting the institutions in the society in any direct way. […] We have noticed how separatists in our area, instead of doing political organizing, often do zap acts. For example, they might come to a meeting or series of meetings then move on their way. It is not clear what they're actually trying to change. **We sometimes think of separatism as the politics without a practice."[5]**

In the current context it is quite consistent for Russian feminists to claim pacifism and categorically disassociate themselves from Putin, from the war he is waging, and from the whole part of Russian society that supports this war. In their anti-war manifesto, Russian pacifist feminists characterize the war as a war of aggression, and Putin as solely responsible. This pacifist position on the part of the Russian feminists is thus perfectly compatible with supporting the armed resistance in Ukraine. On the other hand, it would seem impossible for many Ukrainian feminists to dissociate themselves from their own community (however sexist it may be), if only for the sake of survival. Yet, at the

same time, Ukrainian feminists have no choice but to keep leading the feminist struggle within their own society if they do not want to see gender/sexism further reinforced. While lesbian separatism was the privilege of those who experienced oppression only on the basis of gender and sexuality, abstract pacifism is the privilege of those who do not live under bombardment and feel no need to take up arms to defend themselves. Doing feminist politics away from the battlefield is as easy as it is sterile.

Internationalist feminist politics must take as its starting point the voices of the people concerned. Any feminist politics that is done without these voices will ultimately be done against them, and will thus be detrimental to the construction of global feminist solidarity. How could a position that turns its back on Ukrainian feminists and has the effect of silencing them on gender issues be qualified as feminist or internationalist? The only political actors capable of carrying out an emancipatory political project in Ukraine are those who are on the spot. We should better start listening to them and supporting them, despite any possible disagreements, because it will be them, as they are and with their own contradictions, who will lead the struggle. Or it will be nobody.

NB: If you want to financially support feminist activism in Ukraine, you can make your donations to the feminist collectives Bilkis and Feminist Workshop or to the anti-capitalist organization Sotsialnyi Rukh, in which feminists carry out specifically feminist political work.

Notes

[1] Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003) *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity.* Durham & London: Duke. University Press. p.7.

[2] For an overview on the ideological and organizational principles of the Kurdish Women's Movement: Dirik, Dilar (2017) "Self-Defense Means Political Autonomy! The Women's Movement of Kurdistan Envisioning and Pursuing New Paths for Radical Democratic Autonomy". *Development* 60, 74–79. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41301-017-0136-3

[3] The use of the word *peshmerga* to designate Kurdish women fighters is problematic. *Peshmerga* refers to the Kurdish fighters in Iraq. As Dilar Dirik and Bahar Munzir explain, Kurdish women fighters in Iraq are in a very small minority within the combat units where there is a rigid sexual division of labor, as the two parties leading Iraqi Kurdistan are patriarchal. Yet women fighters in the YPJ and YJA-Star are often mistakenly referred to as *peshmerga* by the Western media. Cynthia Cockburn reproduces this error in her article, which in turn is taken up by the interviewees.

[4] Where the word 'Europe' is mostly identified with the European Union as a marker of 'civilization' against those considered 'barbarians' who don't belong in it or refuse its discipline.

[5] *Smith, Barbara* and Beverly (2015) "*Across* the *Kitchen Table*: A Sister-to-Sister Dialogue". in Moraga and Anzaldúa (eds.) *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. SUNY Press: New York. p.119.