

On Friday 30 October 2015, WILPF PeaceWomen and the Consortium on Gender, Security and Human Rights held a panel, “Feminist Roadmap for Peace” at the Church Center of the United Nations. Consortium Director Carol Cohn conducted the workshop, which aimed to create space to radically rethink, broaden and deepen the current Women, Peace and Security Agenda.

Participants explored what issues, beyond those commonly thought of as part of the WPS agenda, need to be added to it if the goal is to transform the structures that impede women’s equal participation in political, economic and social life and foreclose sustainable peace. They discussed in depth how to conduct feminist political economic analysis in the area of road-building as an example of how broadening understandings of the WPS agenda is critical for effective implementation. Building on the idea of a “Feminist Playbook for Sustainable Peace,” they suggested how similar approaches that address gendered power structures are critical sustainable and transformative change.

Cohn started the discussion by asking participants, “What is the goal of the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda?” Answers included: to end war and create just peace; to transform security institutions to promote gender justice; to challenge the mainstream definition of peace and security to ensure feminist perspectives are reflected; to strengthen women’s participation, protection, and rights in conflict prevention and post-conflict reconstruction processes; to be more inclusive in processes towards social justice; and, simply, gender equality. Cohn then asked participants to hypothetically imagine what the answer would be if this question had been posed to the Security Council. The group agreed that the answers would be merely “participation” and “prevention of conflict-related sexual violence.” This clearly illustrated the disconnection between civil society vision for transformative change and the incremental and depoliticised approaches prioritised by governments in discussions today.

Cohn next challenged the group to define the elements that are missing from the WPS Agenda if it is to be truly transformative. The two most common answers among the group were “full and effective women’s participation” and “implementation.” The discussion then turned to what full and effective participation in peace processes would look like. Cohn noted how a focus on participation often brings with it the hope that if women are at the table, it is not just a change in numbers but a change in issues and dynamics that is a major goal. Participants recognised that it is not enough for women to be at the table, since women do not automatically advocate for women’s rights. Women are not a homogenous group. Substantive participation depends on which women are present, and whether they bring the voices of women from communities to the table and advocate for nonviolence and transformation of the militarised status quo. However, adding token women does make women more visible and sometimes can be a foot-in-the-door in a formerly all masculine space, if there is effective space and authority for women to speak and be heard.

Next, participants addressed the issue of implementation of the WPS Agenda. Cohn brought up the challenge of relying on the Security Council for implementation. For example, five of the six biggest arms dealers in the world are the P5 countries (China, France, Russia, United Kingdom and the United States of America), how do you then bring up Small Arms and Light Weapons issues at the Security Council? UNSCR 1325 (2000) and other WPS resolutions are tools, but

they have been shaped by the constraints of that body. We need to think about all of the ways in which different international actors are necessary: NGOs, multi-nationals, and non-state parties.

Finally, participants explored what a feminist analysis of peace would look like in the area of building roads. They explored how and why it is gendered; how it is central to women's ability to participate in economies, politics, and social life; and what the local and global political economic relations that shape the road infrastructure are and why it is central to the WPS agenda. Building on small group breakout sessions, they highlighted the importance of recognising that road building is not just a technical exercise that should be seen as an end result, but a process of building societies. Investing in roads build by, for, and around the experiences of men - and not just local men but male representatives of transnational corporations who aim at profit over human rights - can only further reinforce and perpetuate inequality and structural violence. Recognising infrastructure, and non-traditional elements of political economies as connected to the Women, Peace and Security agenda is critical for preventing conflict and building political economies and infrastructures of gender equality and peace.