

In Syria and Bosnia, women are quietly changing the world



The past few months have been characterised by a retreat into base emotions, predominantly anger and fear.

From the campaigns of [Brexit](#) and [Donald Trump](#), conducted as if facts were no longer relevant, we have been subjected to narratives of “[othering](#)”: migrants, Muslims, splits and vilifications on the left and on the right, a violence in our discourse that is inimical to democracy.

We are right to fear. [China has joined in](#) the conflict in Syria and Iran is openly supporting Russian bombing. Yemen, Libya, Ukraine, Isis, terrorism – the list could go on. And, of course, it makes us scared.

There are two responses to this. We can retreat into nationalism and direct our fear at others, or we can consider an alternative. Nationalism never ends well, but politicians of all hues seem intent on repeating the failures of the past.

The simple version of how we descended into chaos begins with inequalities – power structures that favour the few over the many and are highly gender-biased. Within those power structures are a multitude of different discriminations, based on class, race, religion and sexual orientation. The result of the political economy as it stands deepens divides and leads to exclusion. With exclusion comes insecurity and the more insecure people feel, the more likely they are to look for protection.

In response, narratives of militarised security are being recreated – think [Theresa May’s response to the nuclear question](#) – and all the progress we thought we had made in changing the structures and power relations within our institutions dissolves.

I would venture that most people don't like what they see happening, but finding a different path is hard. Alternative theories of change are ridiculed as naive.

Mobilisation is essential, recognising that there is a common voice that wants a different future. We need to develop that alternative. At the [Association for Women's Rights in Development](#) (Awid) international forum this week, feminists, male and female, will roll out ideas for change. These ideas are born of experience, research and practice on how we can move away from cultures of violence to non-violence and political negotiation, brokered by the (reformed) bodies mandated to do so, and based on inclusivity and human rights.

There are examples of how we can do this. One is the work in [Bosnia and how that has informed women in Syria](#) and Ukraine on the failures that arise from exclusion from peace processes, post-conflict governance structures and, obviously, policymaking.

In Bosnia, the peace agreement was drawn up by a foreign power and signed by the warlords. It has not worked. After two decades of women striving for change, providing services where there are none but being ignored as a political voice, we looked at that peace agreement from a feminist perspective, bringing in feminist academics on militarism, political economy, law and policy with the experience of the Bosnians activists, to devise a way of transitioning from institutionalised conflict, using intelligent economic policies, human rights and international institutions to achieve it. The austerity policies pursued as a result of conditions set by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank continue to decimate the remnants of social welfare through which survivors of conflict, including survivors of rape, are paid reparations. They may be tiny amounts, but they are needed.

There is an alternative. International financial institutions have to stop driving conflict and become part of the solution. Use the [trillions of dollars in the system](#) to provide for people. Invest in education, healthcare and realistic reparations to take people out of a humiliating dependency. This would break the stranglehold that nationalist parties have. It would give some of the brilliant women in Bosnia the possibility of participating in governance without having to side with the nationalists.

The lessons are being applied in Syria where, in the middle of war, women are taking on patriarchy, working on delivering human rights and real gender analysis in humanitarian assistance, and education, and trying to get into local government to accelerate that

approach. They are not known, not supported, but vital as a means of transforming the conflict from the inside and accelerating the possibility of peace.

There is more being done by feminists worldwide, most of it unrecognised, but it is a real force for change, an alternative to the binary narrative we have now. We need to create the political platform to make it work.

Madeleine Rees will be speaking at [Awid's 13th forum](#), in Bahia, Brazil, from 8-11 September 2016. Awid partners the Guardian on its women's rights and gender equality coverage