

Ukraine Programme

# How can women reclaim the word “peace”?

Rifts have opened between women living in exile and those who have stayed behind in Ukraine. Our work this year has focused on bringing the women together so they can share their stories and speak in safety about “peace”, a politically charged word. A joint publication will capture their stories, but the women continue to face the challenge of thinking about and preparing for peace while the war is still in progress.



“I felt a reluctance to speak of ‘peace’,” recalls our director Deborah Schibler. She is speaking about a Women’s Peace Table (WPT) that took place in Poland this summer. Both women who had fled and women who had stayed in Ukraine attended the events. The conversations at the WPT made it clear that rifts are forming. They also showed how difficult it is for the women to talk about peace. They explained that the word “peace” has been appropriated politically by Russia. To speak of peace is to support the Russian narrative. When the word “peace” is appropriated by the enemy, working out a common vision of peace or calling oneself a “peace activist”, is made immensely more difficult.

From her work in countries affected by war and armed conflict, Deborah also recognises a common pattern among Ukrainian women. Women who want to make peace in times of war practice self-censorship. They know that if they make demands on the government, opponents will take advantage of this to denounce the government as weak. Women’s legitimate demands are manipulated by the opposition to pass as criticism of the government.



The core group of the Ukraine programme:  
 Olena Zinenko,  
 Deborah Schibler,  
 Annemarie Sancar,  
 Olga Larina (back from left to right) and  
 Olga Syniugina (seated).

During wars, governments also put the women off: “Wait, your requests will come later. We have more urgent things to do. We have to win the war first,” said Nora Ahmetaj, a recognised feminist and expert on transitional justice from Kosovo, at an event in Bern in September. With this, she wanted to spur on the activists from Ukraine not to allow themselves to be put off until later.

### Common path to peace

But what can be more urgent than building peace? And how do women contribute to paving the way to peace – women like the participants, who have taken part in the 11 WPTs we have held since 2021 with our Ukrainian partner organisation KFR Public Alternative? One stage of this journey is to create safe spaces for women to share their personal experiences and to listen to each other in order to build mutual understanding. The WPTs show how important these encounters are: to overcome the rifts between refugees and those who have remained at home to prevent divergent visions of the future. At the beginning of these meetings, the discussions revolved around their safety as women in Ukrainian society – and there they found a lot of common ground.

Even before the war, women lived in precarious conditions. Domestic violence, sole responsibility for care work, lack of basic health care, limited access to affordable housing and a fixed income came up again and again in the discussions. In exile, however, women encountered other models of masculinity and family, as many now must independently care for their children and achieve economic self-sufficiency.

### Doubts about returning

“The last two years have triggered an identity crisis for many women,” says Annemarie Sancar, who was our programme manager for Ukraine until the end of October. Women also raised doubts about whether returning to Ukraine would be the best thing for them and their children. When one woman mentioned the ever-widening gap with her husband who had stayed behind, other women were able to open up and share their fears.

Expressing such doubts and making such admissions publicly carry great risks for the women, as they could be portrayed as traitors in Ukraine. Therefore, they point to legitimate reasons for their exile: the children are at school or the son has a job. This way,

→ Continued from page 1

they do not have to question the patriarchal structure at home, Annemarie explains. However, these doubts and differentiated starting points risk widening the gap between them and the women who remained in Ukraine.

What next: overcoming divides

The women have shared their personal stories at the five WPTs held virtually and in Krakow, Frankfurt an der Oder, Prague and Przemysl (Poland) since the beginning of the war. These will soon be brought together in a publication. The stories are different; the book unites them into a document of the times, rich in the details that emerged in the narratives. One day, historians and journalists will be able to benefit from it in their work on the war.

The WPT participants were invited to use the ideas that emerged in the discussions to develop concrete initiatives. We are supporting these Feminist Peace Initiatives with financial contributions to promote innovative approaches. It is also important that the projects should have political impact.

The core group, which has been meeting regularly since 2022, also continues to work on building bridges between the women in Ukraine and in exile, between the political and the feminist understanding of peace, between the lived reality and the political narratives.

For our future programme, the challenge remains: how can women reclaim the concept of “peace” and develop alternative narratives that emerge from their everyday lives? Together with them, we want to create an environment that will allow for these discussions and preparations for peace to take place. Together with them, we are on the road to peace.

You can find out more about our work in Ukraine and the Feminist Peace Initiatives on our website.

Cover photo: At the Women’s Peace Table, Ukrainian women who have fled to Poland reflect on their experiences, their possible return and what peace means to them in concrete terms.

Women’s Peace Table in Colombia

## The women agree: „The only way is peace“

Conflict-affected women from four different regions participated in a Women’s Peace Table in Popayán in southern Colombia this summer. On the agenda for the two-day gathering organised by our partner organisation Comunitar: create a space for women to exchange experiences and to deepen their knowledge on transitional justice and reconciliation. Our programme manager Karin Widmer was there.

It is early morning in a neighbourhood near Popayán. The women are arriving, some from nearby, many from remote regions like Santander or Putumayo. They travelled by car or bus, some on foot. The venue for the Women’s Peace Table (WPT) with its green garden and white indoor hall comes alive with the laughter and joyful greetings of those who are meeting again or being introduced as newcomers. Some of the women add items to the colourful mandala prepared by our partner organisation Comunitar. All are eager to start.

The more than 100 participants, staff and resource persons form a circle around the mandala, decorated with flowers, candles, colourful stones and butterflies. The mandala is the logo of the WPT: the face of a woman. Comunitar integrates the psychosocial approach into all its activities; it is part of its institutional profile as an eco-feminist NGO. We hold hands, close our eyes and start by reconnecting with the first “territory of peace”: our bodies. A Comunitar staff member, a psychologist, leads the session and allows us to connect with ourselves so that we are empowered and equipped

to connect with others and to confront the realities of the ongoing conflicts in Colombia.

Connected by their commitment to peace

The women are a diverse group: they describe themselves as farmers, afro-descendants, indigenous peoples, students, members of the LGBTIQ+ community and rural women from conflict-affected territories. What connects them? They are all affected by the different on-going conflicts in Colombia – despite the 2016 peace agreement with the FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia) – and they are all committed peacebuilders.

One aim of the WPT is to deepen the women’s knowledge of the mechanisms of transitional justice (TJ) with the support of resource persons from the Peace Commission of the University of Cauca and from the regional branch of the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP, Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz). The JEP, part of the Comprehensive System of Truth, Justice, Reparation and Non-Rep- etition (Comprehensive System for Peace) that was created with



Indigenous Misak women pose next to the mandala.



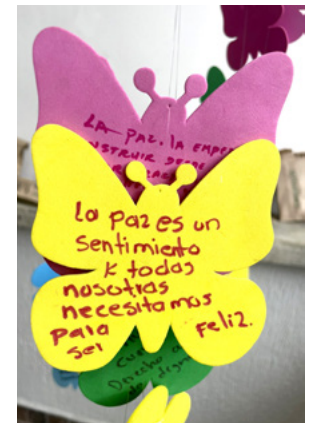


“These meetings allow each of us to grow”: Participants at the Women’s Peace Table in Popayán. Our programme manager Karin Widmer is third from right.

the 2016 peace accord, is tasked with administering transitional justice and dealing with crimes during the armed conflict, in particular crimes that constitute serious violations of International Humanitarian Law or Human Rights Law. The JEP’s declared objectives are to satisfy the victims’ right to justice and to protect their rights, to provide truth to Colombian society and to contribute to a stable and lasting peace.

During the WPT, the resource persons explain what the women’s rights are and how they can make use of the TJ mechanisms. JEP works with organisations like Comunitar to ensure an equal and diverse representation of women’s voices and experiences in dealing with Colombia’s past and in seeking restorative justice. The women learn how they can be part of these processes. In their discussions, they strategise how they can become a strong voice in this period of transitional justice and contribute to and demand justice. They are clear in their recognition that it’s not enough for women to be part of peace processes; their political participation is crucial to securing the gender-sensitive outcomes of the TJ mechanisms.

One participant wrote on this butterfly: “Peace is a feeling we all need to be happy.”



#### Harsh realities: femicide

But it is also the harsh realities in the territories that emerge throughout the WPT. “We talk about peace, but in our *territorios* there is still war,” says a woman. Diana Granados, the resource person from the University of Cauca, pauses, then walks to the centre of the room to share a story from the previous night. She was in her room preparing an analysis of the achievements of the 2016 peace process and the participation of women in such processes. Suddenly: four gunshots. She ran out onto the street to see what was going on. Soon after, she learned that a young woman had been shot by a man. Another femicide in Colombia. “So, I was preparing this talk about peace and next door a woman was killed. This is our everyday reality,” Diana says.

Yet the women continue to work for peace, despite the danger and the setbacks. They draw hope from gatherings like this WPT. “Every day I feel more powerful. These gatherings let each of us grow more,” one participant reflects. The women agree: “The only way is peace.”

We form another circle to close the WPT. We hold each other’s hands again and connect with our bodies. I can feel the women’s courage, their compassion, their pain and their commitment to continue on the path of peace. And I remember a wall-painting I saw in a village in Cauca: “*La Paz comienza con una sonrisa.*” Peace starts with a smile.



Diana Granados, professor at the University of Cauca, talks about feminist peace work.

It is realisations like these and the strategies that grow from the discussions at the WPT that mark the shared space during the two days. “We need these Peace Tables,” one participant says. “We need to understand how the Comprehensive System works. And we need to learn proactive tools for the *Paz Total* [Total Peace]. How can we be mediators?”

Find out more about our work in Colombia on our website under: Programmes | Participation in Peace Processes

“Feminists Connecting for Peace” magazine

## Security: feminist, not militaristic

Making the work of feminist peace activists from our global network visible is at the core of our vision and practice. The “Feminists Connecting for Peace” magazine was launched in 2022 for this purpose. In the second issue, the authors shed light on the topic of “security”.

“What does security mean to you? What gives you a sense of security? What threatens it?” These questions are at the heart of many of the discussions in our global Feminists Connecting for Peace network. For this reason, we have chosen the theme of “security” for this year’s issue of the magazine of the same name.

From Cameroon to Kosovo  
The contributions from Cameroon to Kosovo show what security means from a feminist perspective and how this understanding contradicts a militaristic interpretation of security. Here is a brief overview of the topics covered in the nine contributions:

- **Cameroonian activist Caryn Dasah** describes the impact of the civil war, also known as the “Anglophone crisis”, on women and girls. Their safety is threatened by military “security measures” such as curfews.
- **Feminist activists in rural Indonesia** are admonished not to “disturb the harmony”. Activist and founder of ArtsforWomen, Olin Monteiro, questions what this “harmony” is based on.
- **Kosovo is experiencing an increase in femicide**, writes feminist activist and transitional justice and conflict transformation specialist **Nora Ahmetaj**. Kosovian activists are demanding that gender-based violence be addressed systemically.

- **Our programme officer Karin Widmer** reflects on and shares her insights about her experiences with security in the Philippines, where she worked for six years, as well as in Switzerland.
- **Yasmine Janah**, former programme officer at swisspeace, suggests how the concept of masculinities can be integrated into a feminist approach to peacebuilding, as gender analyses often leave out men and boys.
- **The traditional human-centred understanding of security of the CHamoru in Guam** is central to their resistance to the perceived occupation by the US and its military base on the island, explains **Linda Lisa Natividad**, founder of a network of indigenous women in the Pacific.
- **Yaliwe Clarke** from the University of Cape Town questions “liberal feminist discourses” in her work over several years with peace groups in conflict-affected regions of Uganda.

**We hope you have an inspiring, stimulating read!**

The first issue of the magazine dealt with the topic of “militarisation”. You can find both issues on our website under: [Publications and Multimedia](#) | [Publications](#).



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Information on how to donate and become a member can be found on [www.1000peacewomen.org](http://www.1000peacewomen.org). You can find the current annual report under: [Publications and Multimedia](#) | [Annual Report](#).

### Imprint

#### PeaceWomen Across the Globe

Bollwerk 39, 3011 Bern  
Switzerland

✉ [info@1000peacewomen.org](mailto:info@1000peacewomen.org)

☎ +41 31 312 02 40

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**Editors:** Christina Stucky,  
Deborah Schibler  
**Authors:** Christina Stucky,  
Karin Widmer  
**Translators:** Caroline Morrissey,  
Christina Stucky  
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