

Intersectional Feminist Justice and the Struggle for Peace in the Context of Turkey, Kurdistan and the Middle East

Good evening everyone.

I would like to begin by remembering Evelyn Dürmayer, to whom this course is dedicated.

Evelyn was an important jurist, a committed member of the International Association of Democratic Lawyers, an editor of the *International Review of Contemporary Law*, and someone who worked within United Nations mechanisms. But more than that, she belonged to a political and legal tradition that did not separate peace from justice, women's freedom from the freedom of peoples, or legal struggle from political responsibility.

Her work, especially in relation to the Commission on the Status of Women, reminds us of something very basic, but still very urgent: women's freedom cannot be reduced to equal rights or representation. It is part of a much broader struggle against war, occupation, militarism, imperialism, economic violence and impunity.

So remembering Evelyn today is not only a tribute to a comrade we have recently lost. It is also a way of thinking about her struggle through the questions of our own time.

Across the world, women live at the intersection of war, occupation, colonialism, state violence, male violence and market violence. Women's bodies are treated in many different ways: as spoils of war, as the honor of the nation, as the property of the family, or as a space to be disciplined by the state.

For this reason, when we speak about women's freedom, we inevitably speak about war and peace, occupation and resistance, law and impunity, body and sovereignty.

In this talk, I will speak about Turkey, the Kurdish freedom struggle, Cyprus, Rojava and Palestine. I am not bringing these examples together simply to offer a comparative list. I think it is important to think about Cyprus, Rojava and Palestine together, because these are places where Turkey's historical and current responsibilities, crimes, denial policies and political pragmatism become very visible.

They also show us that women's struggle for peace is not an abstract language of good intentions. It is a concrete struggle for justice against genocide, occupation, displacement, colonialism, militarism, patriarchal violence and impunity.

Let me say from the beginning what I mean by peace.

I am not speaking about a soft, pink, neutral idea of peace that stands at an equal distance from all sides of a war. I use the term "feminist peace" deliberately.

Feminist peace is not simply saying: "Everyone should calm down," "the weapons should fall silent," or "the parties should sit at the table." Of course, the silencing of

weapons matters. Of course, ending armed conflict is urgent. But if occupation continues, if peoples are denied their right to self-determination, if sexual violence against women remains unpunished, if the fate of the disappeared is not revealed, if language, identity and memory are suppressed, if courts produce state reason rather than justice, and if genocide continues before the eyes of the world, then we cannot build a real demand for peace only around the silence of weapons.

This is why I suggest that we understand feminist peace as anti-militarist, anti-imperialist, anti-colonial, anti-capitalist, anti-patriarchal and justice-oriented.

But I also want to say this in a simpler way: feminist peace asks what war does to everyday life. It asks how war reorganizes labor, how it deepens poverty, how it destroys care, and how it puts very concrete burdens on women's lives.

This is where the class dimension becomes very important.

War and militarism do not target bodies alone. They also target labor and reorganize it. In war, women are exposed to sexual violence, displacement and loss. But they also carry the burden of care work, precarious labor, forced migration, poverty and survival.

When a home is destroyed, when a hospital is bombed, when a school is closed, when men are killed, imprisoned or left unemployed, the work of rebuilding life often falls on women's shoulders. So feminist peace, in my view, cannot be only about legal equality or political representation. It must also be about labor, resources, land, housing, health and care.

Let me make this more concrete through Cyprus.

I was in Cyprus recently, and perhaps because of that, it was one of the first examples that came to my mind while preparing for this course. The "Women Walk Home" marches in Cyprus are an important historical experience. They show how militarized borders, occupation and division become part of women's everyday lives.

In these marches, women demanded the right to return home. They opposed occupation and the division of the island. Here, "home" is not simply a private space. Home is memory. Home is land. Home is the life that people insist on against displacement.

So the demand of women to return home was also a political refusal of the normalization of a militarized geography.

Cyprus should not be seen only as a peace movement of the past. It is also one of the places where Turkey's military presence, occupation policy and regional power politics have historically been concentrated. The Cypriot women's marches tell us something important: women's demand for peace may begin with something very concrete, like the right to return home, but from there it opens up a broader questioning of occupation, borders, militarized masculinity and state sovereignty.

If we turn to Turkey, one of the most important fields of women's peace struggle is, of course, the Kurdish question.

The women's peace movement in Turkey does not come from one single tradition. Independent feminists, the Kurdish women's movement, the Peace Mothers, the Saturday Mothers, the human rights movement, working-class women, the LGBTIQ+ movement, socialist women and legal activists all come from different histories. But when we speak about war, disappearance, enforced disappearance in custody, impunity, sexual violence, male-state violence and denial, these different lines come into contact with one another.

This contact has not always been easy. The relationship between the feminist movement in Turkey and the Kurdish question has included contradictions, delays, silences and moments of confrontation. That is precisely why I think intersectionality matters here.

Intersectionality does not simply mean saying that "women are different." It means looking at how patriarchy works together with racism, colonialism, class, state violence, heteronormativity, militarism and punishment.

The violence experienced by a Kurdish woman and the violence experienced by a Turkish woman may both belong to the same patriarchal order. But they do not operate in the same way. State violence, racialization, poverty, language, geography and the experience of war all change the form that violence takes.

The Peace Mothers are very important in this regard. They are not simply women making an emotional call for peace through motherhood. They transform loss, mourning, care and motherhood into political resistance. While defending the right to life of children whom the state dehumanizes through the language of "terror," they ask society a very hard question: Which deaths are considered grievable? Which children are recognized as human? Which mother's pain is allowed to be legitimate?

This question brings us to the Saturday Mothers.

The Saturday Mothers remind us of one of the most basic conditions of peace in Turkey: there can be no peace without truth. If the fate of the disappeared is not revealed, if perpetrators are not prosecuted, if the crimes of the state are not confronted, and if the demand for justice is still repressed, then we cannot speak of peace in any meaningful sense.

Their presence in Galatasaray Square has transformed that place into a space of memory and justice. That square tells us that justice is not produced only in courtrooms. Sometimes it is built by carrying a photograph for years. Sometimes by insisting on the same square. Sometimes by repeating the question "Where is my child?" despite all mechanisms of denial.

I think we should also look carefully at the political use of motherhood here.

States often sanctify motherhood through the reproduction of the nation, sacrifice and silence. But the Peace Mothers and the Saturday Mothers reverse this image. They refuse to be mothers who raise soldiers for the state or mourn silently. They become political subjects who demand truth from the state.

This is also an important dimension of feminist peace: care and mourning are not outside politics. They are central to the struggle for justice.

Another brutal form of violence against women is the transformation of the female body into a battlefield.

In wars, women's bodies are not only attacked. They are used as a site of message, humiliation and punishment. Rape, forced nudity, cutting hair, attacking funerals, mutilating bodies or circulating images of bodies are not isolated individual crimes. They are performances of militarized masculinity, colonial domination and racialized violence.

International law has historically failed women in situations of conflict. For a long time, sexual violence was treated not as an attack on women's bodily autonomy and political existence, but as an offense against honor, morality, the family or the dignity of the community.

It is, of course, important that international criminal law now recognizes rape, sexual slavery, forced pregnancy, forced prostitution and other forms of sexual violence as international crimes. But feminist justice cannot stop at naming crimes. It must also ask: Why are some victims recognized while others are abandoned? Why are some occupations condemned while others are normalized? Why is accountability applied to some states, while suspended for others?

The case of Ekin Wan, a Kurdish woman guerrilla whose naked body was exposed after she was killed, is one of the most shocking examples in Turkey's recent history.

The target was not only one woman. The target was Kurdish women's resistance. The target was the claim of women to become subjects in war, politics, self-defense, public life and the struggle for freedom. Her body was stripped, exposed and circulated as if it were a spoil of war. The message to Kurdish society, and especially to Kurdish women, was this: we have power over your body, your mourning, your dignity and your resistance.

We saw a similar message in the Syrian context as well, when a braid of hair allegedly belonging to a Kurdish woman fighter was displayed. Again, we see the same patriarchal symbolism. A braid is not just a braid here. It becomes a way of targeting the female body, Kurdish identity, resistance and honor.

The response of Kurdish and Yazidi women, braiding their own hair in solidarity, can be read as a way of turning the body back into a site of resistance against its use as a war trophy.

There is a continuity, sometimes open and sometimes more hidden, between patriarchal-jihadist violence and the militarized masculinity of states. In one case, the female body is disciplined in the name of religion. In the other, in the name of the nation, security or counter-terrorism. But in both cases, women's bodies are turned into a field of political domination.

This is why the Rojava example is so important.

I do not think we should read Rojava only as a part of the Syrian civil war or as a regional extension of Kurdish politics. Rojava should also be seen as a specific experience in which the claim of women's freedom was built under conditions of war.

Women's self-defense, local democracy, co-chairship, women's assemblies and practices of social transformation in Rojava showed that another political imagination was possible in the region. Rojava women did not become only the symbol of military resistance against ISIS. They also defended women's freedom as a founding principle of peace and democratic life.

Turkey's military operations against Rojava, its cross-border interventions and its policies targeting Kurdish political gains cannot be separated from a feminist peace perspective. Rojava has been targeted not only because of regional power calculations. I think it is also targeted because it represents a social experiment led by women.

The fact that women's institutions, cooperatives, assemblies, defense structures and forms of political representation are surrounded by war is directly relevant to feminist justice.

Palestine, I believe, must be at the center of any discussion on women's struggle, feminist peace and justice.

The violence experienced by Palestinian women emerges at the intersection of occupation, apartheid, displacement, imprisonment, impoverishment, denial of healthcare, the killing of family members and genocide. Palestine shows us very clearly that women's rights cannot be reduced to an abstract question of equality under conditions of occupation and genocide.

When a woman loses her home, her child, her school, her hospital, her land, her water, her freedom of movement and her right to life, we cannot approach her only through the language of "gender equality." Feminist justice, in this context, must be anti-colonial, anti-imperialist, anti-Zionist and anti-occupation.

Palestine also makes the question of class painfully visible.

Blockade, occupation and bombardment are not only forms of military violence. They are also a regime that attacks the material conditions of life. The destruction of access to food, water, electricity, healthcare, education and housing turns care work into a matter of life and death.

Trying to keep children alive, caring for the elderly, carrying the wounded, rebuilding daily life among ruins — this is invisible labor, but it is heavy labor. It is mostly carried by women. So when we speak about the freedom of Palestinian women, we must also speak about the material conditions of life.

This is why I bring Cyprus, Rojava and Palestine together.

All three are places where Turkey is directly or indirectly connected to historical and current conflicts. In Cyprus, there is occupation and militarized division. In Rojava, there is an ongoing military threat against the political experience built by the Kurdish people, and especially by women. In Palestine, there is the genocide going on made possible by imperialist capitalism and international impunity.

These examples also show that feminist peace cannot be selective.

Here I want to be careful. There are, of course, very important and powerful exceptions within feminist movements in Europe and in Turkey. Many women, organizations and comrades have taken courageous positions. But there is still a real problem we need to name.

In parts of European feminism, especially in places like Germany, Austria and Switzerland, some movements strongly support Rojava but hesitate when it comes to Palestine. In Turkey, some parts of the feminist movement have kept a distance from Kurdish freedom demands. And Cyprus is often barely discussed at all.

I think these silences show that feminist internationalism still has serious tests before it. Feminist peace cannot be shaped according to the foreign policy interests of states. Where there is occupation, colonialism, militarism and war violence against women's bodies, we should be able to speak with the same principled language of justice.

I also want to turn to the connection between male violence and war politics in Turkey.

The violence directed at women's bodies in war and male violence inside the home should not be seen as separate worlds. The logic that turns a woman's body into a spoil of war and the logic that punishes a woman for defending herself both belong to the same patriarchal order.

This is why I think we can read the exposure of a Kurdish woman guerrilla's body and the punishment of a woman who defended herself after systematic sexual violence through the same political lens.

The case of Nevin Yıldırım is important here. Her story shows, in a very striking way, the tension between women's right to life and the patriarchal character of the judiciary in Turkey.

A woman who says she was subjected to systematic sexual assault defended herself. But the judiciary did not treat her case through the lens of sexual violence, coercion, the absence of effective protection mechanisms or the right to life. It treated it as a crime to be punished.

For feminist lawyers, the question is this: Under what conditions are women accepted as “proper victims”? Whose resistance is considered legitimate? Do women gain sympathy only when they are dead? Why are they punished when they resist violence in order to survive?

Turkey’s withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention belongs to the same political universe.

In one sense, the withdrawal made official what was already happening in practice. But it was also a political message from the state to male violence. With this decision, the state showed that it was politically withdrawing from its obligation to protect women from male violence.

The language used during the withdrawal process also matters. Phrases such as “protecting the family,” “national values,” and “gender ideology” are part of a broader authoritarian patriarchal politics that targets the right to life of women and LGBTIQ+ people.

So we return to the question I began with: What is peace?

If we understand peace only as the absence of war between states or simply an arm conflict within states and non state actors, then we miss male violence, sexual violence, disappearances, domestic domination, patriarchal courtrooms, prisons, borders and occupation.

Feminist peace offers another way of looking. It connects state violence and male violence. It sees the continuity between occupation and domination inside the home. It shows the relationship between impunity and militarism. And it insists that peace is possible only with justice, truth, equality, freedom and accountability.

This is also why we should think carefully about any new possibility of peace in Turkey.

I want to be very clear here: I am not arguing against the current search for peace, nor against dialogue, negotiation or the possibility of ending armed conflict. On the contrary, every step that can stop death and open a path toward a just peace is precious and should be taken seriously.

But I do think we should be careful not to reduce peace to the language of security bureaucracy, technical disarmament or negotiations between the state and armed actors alone.

Of course, ending the conflict is vital. Of course, deaths must stop. But a lasting and just peace cannot be built only by silencing weapons. The collective rights of the Kurdish people, mother tongue, local democracy, political prisoners, the disappeared, forced displacement, women's political representation, the appointment of trustees to municipalities, impunity, confrontation with the past and gender justice must all be treated as essential parts of peace.

This is why I see feminist peace as one of the strongest political tools we have today.

Feminist peace does not see women only as victims. It sees them as founding subjects of peace. It does not only describe how women are affected by war. It also makes visible how women struggle against war, occupation, militarism and patriarchy.

We can see a shared truth in the marches of Cypriot women demanding return, in the calls of the Peace Mothers, in the insistence of the Saturday Mothers, in the women's revolution in Rojava, in the resistance of Palestinian women against genocide, in the solidarity built around Nevin Yıldırım and other women punished for self-defense, and in the women who took to the streets for the Istanbul Convention.

That truth is this: women are not only victims of war. They are the makers of a just and dignified peace.

I would like to end with three points.

First, I suggest that we define peace not as the absence of war, but as the building of justice. When occupation, colonialism, male violence, state violence and impunity continue, we cannot speak of real peace. Peace means truth, accountability, freedom for peoples and safety for women's lives.

Second, the struggle against the transformation of women's bodies into battlefields cannot be narrowed down to the category of "violence against women." The exposure of women's bodies, the display of hair as a war trophy, the punishment of women who use self-defense against sexual violence, the repression of mothers demanding justice and the withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention belong to the same political world. In that world, women's bodies, voices, memory and demands for justice are placed under control. Feminist struggle must confront this regime of control.

Third, feminist peace must be intersectional. We should not separate the struggle of Kurdish women, the resistance of Palestinian women, the marches of Cypriot women against occupation, the women's revolution in Rojava, the truth demand of the Saturday Mothers, self-defense cases against male violence and the struggle within international law. I think we should look at them as parts of the same geography of liberation.

For this reason, I propose feminist peace not as a decorative language of inclusion, but as a transformative language of justice.

This is not a soft language of reconciliation without accountability. It is a radical language of justice against genocide, occupation, militarism, patriarchy, colonialism, capitalism and impunity.

Thank you.