THE HUMAN COST OF WAR

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By Diana Francis, Open Democracy, 10 December 2009

Diana Francis, author of Rethink War and Peace, has worked as a consultant on conflict transformation with local activists in Europe, the Middle East, Africa and Asia. She is a former President of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation and Chair of the Committee for Conflict Transformation Support. In this article she describes an exhibition of quilts and arpilleras made by women from Ireland to Chile as a rallying call to say no to violence, public and private, on any scale, for the abolition of war and to transform the culture of violence in which women are objectified and subjugated.

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Quilts I knew about, but what were arpilleras? I put my question to the exhibition's curator, Roberta Bacic. She explained that they are images created on a backing of hessian from old sacks, the bright and sombre forms sown onto it being fashioned from the remnants of worn-out clothing.

The exhibition is visually striking and beautiful. It is also political, the works being created to communicate vital messages.

Eight of these arpilleras come from Chile, Roberta's home country, where she was a member of the

National Reparation and Reconciliation Corporation which was established as a follow up to the Truth Commission to investigate the atrocities of Augusto Pinochet's bloody dictatorship in the 1970s. In her work, she interviewed many women whose relatives had been the victims of kidnap, torture and extra-judicial killing. Five of the arpilleras, all of them anonymous, were made during that period, in workshops that gave them a space to share their suffering and resistance and a way of giving visual expression to them and making known what had been done. They also enabled them to earn a little money from the sale of their work.

The impact of these images is powerful, their life-affirming vibrancy contrasting with the grief and anger of their messages and combining with them to convey a spirit of fierce determination. One, simply but strongly composed, has in the foreground a group of brightly dressed women, who are standing in front of the grim, grey Courts of Justice in Santiago, holding a banner with the question that gives the work its title: *Where are the disappeared?* . Two policemen are approaching, armed and faceless, their police car standing nearby.

Very different is an arpillera entitled *Dancing cueca alone*, in design reminiscent of a Toulouse Lautrec poster and in content deeply poignant and dignified, speaking of death and life together. I find it almost unbearably touching. Another, entitled *Homage to the fallen ones*, shows the still bright homes they have left behind, while *Peace, Justice, Freedom*. depicts mountains, radiant sun and colourful buildings but also women protesting in front of a police car and giving out leaflets, and the road and ground are each made from the clothes of a disappeared person.

Five arpilleras are from Spain. They were made only this year, in Badalona, at a Women Sewing History Workshop, where women came together to remember their experiences of the Spanish Civil War and to give expression to their memories. These works are less detailed than the arpilleras from Chile and Peru, but their simplicity has its own eloquence. One is made by seventy-two year old Angela Matamoros Vazquez and her daughter Angela Vazquez Gonzalez, and the process of creating it was a means to pass the memory from one generation to the next. It shows men being taken away in a truck and the women who have come to say goodbye, knowing that they will never return. The arpillera does not show their place of execution. The road along which the truck travels goes straight past bright houses and trees to their graves, marked by big stones and dark crosses.

There are several quilts from Ireland, where quilting was used as a focus for bringing women together across the divide, helping them to begin to deal with the past and rebuild their sense of commonality. One piece of work hanging here, the *Northern Ireland Peace Quilt*, was made by Women Together. It consists of sixteen very varied panels on a black background, with the words justice, equality, solidarity and peace around the edges. These words combine with the variety of positive images and the bright colour contrasts to create a mood of hope. But the peace is under renewed threat and Sonia Copeland's arpillera, with women demonstrating in from of Belfast City Hall, calls for *No going back*.

Three others have been made by Irene MacWilliam, whose compositions are striking and whose colours are dramatic, with different shades of red predominating. Perhaps the most powerful is *Common loss: 3000+ dead between 1969 and 1994*. It measures 1.5 by 2.3 metres and is arranged in four panels. Each is composed of tiny pieces of red cloth, massed together but at the same time all clearly individual and different. Each piece of cloth represents one of the people who were killed in 'The Troubles', according to the figure given by the police at that time.

In another quilt, *Executed at dawn,* Irene memorialises one of the soldiers shot for cowardice in the First World War. A grey figure stands motionless and blindfold against a striking abstract background of reds and greys. Her third piece, an arpillera, depicts in stylised, pale shapes, in a receding line, the children who are lost in war, enduring the trauma of fear and separation. They stand on a red foreground while behind them the sky is dark and threatening. Onto it are stitched five little posters, with brief description, of particular children.
Helen Heron, also from Ireland, has contributed a small quilt called *Walking to death.* A small group of soldiers, whose blank faces make them representative of many others, are heading for the front in World War One, oblivious to their fate, which is indicted by the glowing red poppies that are scattered in the foreground. Although the images in this exhibition are mostly of women and have been made by women, the suffering and victimhood of men are also present and the grief expressed is for their loss, too.

I sit and talk with Roberta. In our circle is an English woman, who is sewing as we speak. She was so moved by an exhibition of arpilleras in Cambridge that she had also begun to make arpilleras, addressing the experiences of her own life. One of them, *Reflections on violence*, very much in the style of the Chilean works and skilful in its detail, hangs in this exhibition. It depicts the Free Tibet protest against the carrying of the Olympic Torch through London on its way to Beijing, and the response of British police and Chinese security personnel.

Also in our little group is Heidi Drahota from Germany, whose dramatic embroidered felt hanging, entitled *Cast lead*, is situated near the door and arrests the attention of all who enter. She explains that it was her response to Operation Cast Lead, the recent Israeli Military offensive against Gaza, in which defenceless people, many of them women and children, fled for safety into schools and other public buildings and were killed or injured there. For me the hanging threads represent the rain of metal and explosives. The grey forms beneath suggest the destruction of buildings and the red below evokes fire and human carnage.

As we talk, a group of schoolgirls comes in from the street with their teacher. They sit on the floor and Sue Gilmurray, chair of the Movement for the Abolition of War, speaks to them and sings, holding them in rapt attention. Roberta then takes them round the exhibition, engaging them in animated conversation, as I slip out and head for home.

This exhibition was shocking, saddening and exhilarating. For me it was a rallying call to renewed

commitment: to say no to violence, public and private, on any scale; to work for the abolition of war and to transform the culture of violence in which women are objectified and subjugated. It also strengthened my awareness of the circles of women's solidarity that encompass the globe and their resilience and power. This is what Roberta told me: that at the heart of the exhibition was the idea of solidarity and that its purpose, and the goal of each of its artists, was not to provoke compassion but to subvert the system of violence and stimulate change. Amen to that.