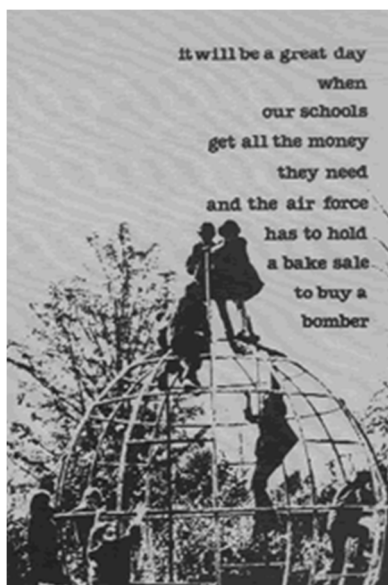


# Trying to make sense in the Caves of the UN building in New York

by [Malin Björk](#)

The final crucial week of meetings of the UN Security Council before Bush and Blair decided on their unilateral and illegal war action, the UN headquarters in New York also hosted – in the caves of the UN building - the annual session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). While women's NGO activists ran around the caves of the UN building with peace petitions trying to make their voices heard, the men were deciding on different degrees of militarism and war three floors up. Needless to say, women's activists did not have access to this floor !



The cave world with its inhabitants having no access to the other floors in the UN building - becomes this surrealist space, where we through little adjustments to words in an official document try to remain sane, try to make sense. We believe in the process, we will not abandon... But in the current context, one cannot help but considering to abandon the UN as an international institution for governance. Really, what is the meaning in a situation like the one we live through right now to continue to think of international governmental commitments to human rights, let alone to women's rights ? There is no public space for this. No space to speak, to be heard, to take action.

Besides trying to make our voices against war heard from the cave, we were all running our feet off to try to pressure official delegates to commit to more international actions to combat violence against women. This process focuses on the formulation and adoption (by governments) of an agreed UN document. For the cave-women's-activists it means running to catch up with the governments' people, stealing photocopier paper from the official delegates' room, hiding invalid badges to get onto the internet at the reserved computers, creating sentences for the text under negotiation (as if the diplomats were not well paid to do just that ?) just to see it refused with a wink. And then finding oneself re-writing the same paragraph – but without a 'semicolon' (for example) ! The most popular amendment by the US

government was to add the phrase “as appropriate” to every commitment in the document - which in practice means no obligations at all. The letters on the paper all cut in pieces, brackets of words, words, and more words. Floating together. Just ...words on a paper. So many, and still so few. That makes any sense. Right now. How can it make sense ?

The media canons of the world were rigged up with all their might outside the UN entrance. The war is on - or more accurate - ‘The show is on’, with one TV station after the other promising that they would be the ones “bringing the [news of the] war”. Before hurrying off to the cave women’s meeting every morning I had a chance to get the latest news from a network under the heading “Showdown Iraq”, where the two newsanchors (lets call them Ken and Barbie) with a smile of curiosity between them tried to figure out the difference between the “Daisy bombs” used in Afghanistan and the “Mother of all Bombs’ (to be tested in Iraq). It is not surprising that those same media were not even aware of the UN meeting on women’s rights – and even less interested in a feminist understanding of the inseparable links between sexism and militarism. The mainstream corporate media in the US has succeeded in selling the war to the people. The enemy picture is again and again disseminated – a demonised version of Islam, while at the same time - in the cave - the US government comfortably makes alliances with their fundamentalist counterparts in Egypt, Sudan, and Iran to deny women their right to decide freely over their own bodies and abortions. But only the UN cave-animals – the women’s activists were watching these alliances – and denouncing them.

Despite our efforts, and also the efforts of some of the governments that have everything to loose from a fragile international governance being replaced by a unilaterally governed world, the process to agree on a document listing actions to fight violence against women failed. Maybe it was in evitable. How could a women’s rights document in support of actions to eradicate violence against women be agreed in an atmosphere where sexism, militarism and war romanticism reigns ?

But wait. The UN did not sponsor the war on Iraq in the end. Bush and Blair are on their own, and the nonaccord of the UN makes their attacks ‘illegal acts of war’ according to The UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan. Not that this matters to the many thousands of Iraqis that will loose their lives, flee from their homes, and see their communities shattered, to the women that will be raped and abused by militaries from both sides, or the women that will be sexually exploited in brothels established for the US military boys. But it might matter for the future. Unless everyone abandon the UN ? The warmongering US governments couldn’t be happier than if we all once and for all did away with the UN and replaced any international structured dialogue by a unilaterally governed world based on missiles. And they count on our tiredness to get away with it.

Women have been central in the global mobilisation against the war on Iraq. However, the feminist analysis of war and militarism, and the feminist agenda for peace and conflict resolution, which provides a way out of the framework of ‘simple’ power politics, remains a minority position (even within the

antiwar movement). As feminist perspectives remains key to an understanding and mobilisation against war, the women's movement will be central to support the (re-)constructing of the UN international governance structures, that can respond and put a firm halt to militarist agendas – even when they are promoted by the most powerful countries and corporate company structures in the world.

For more information on women's actions against militarism : <http://www.womeninblack.net/>  
<http://www.peacewomen.org>    <http://www.batshalom.org/>    <http://www.womenagainstawar.org/>  
<http://www.penelopes.org><http://www.penelopes.org>