

On Women in Peace Building

Marwa Awad, April 29, 2007

Introduction: Beyond Victimhood

“Peace building cannot succeed if half the population is excluded from the process.” This is what many women peace activists around the globe and across many regions have realized in their efforts to build peace at grassroots levels in conflict ridden areas. The efforts of women in making peace and promoting security in war torn zones have been underutilized and unrecognized in the national and international arenas.

Solutions to conflict hinge-on the interconnectedness of gender, human rights, development, security and justice. Therefore, including women in formal peace building processes and recognizing their contribution is paramount to achieving ultimate success.

The following is a summary of four women peace advocacy groups: The Bridge in Israel, WILPF, Coalition of Women for Peace, and Iraqi Women’s League in Baghdad. The overall goal of these groups is to end endemic discrimination and sexual violence against women and ensure their involvement in resolving conflict and their participation in political decision-making.

As these women advocacy groups share similar goals, they also face similar barriers in their respective societies and cultures. Both the Bridge and the Coalition of Women for peace have faced heavy criticism and resistance for daring to overcome racial, religious and cultural barriers by bringing together Israeli and Arab women. Iraqi Women League faces the social and political challenges of the ongoing US occupation.

THE BRIDGE <http://nonprofitnet.ca/wao/wao.php?show&960>

Founded in 1975, two years after the Yom Kippur War, The Bridge: JEWISH AND ARAB WOMEN FOR THE PROMOTION OF WOMEN AND PEACE is a non-profit organization and the first voluntary association of its kind aimed at uniting Jewish and Arab women for peace in the Middle East. Some of the key founding names are Violet Khouri, Ruth Dayan, Yardena Cohen, Eugenie Khlef, among other Israeli and Arab/Palestinian women. The organization is run by an executive Board of four women, two Jewish and two Arab/Palestinian. It is elected by the General Board which comprises twenty members. The yearly General Meeting elects the two Boards, as well as the President, the Director, and the Treasurer.

GOALS:

- To promote peace in the Middle East by improving the status of women.
- To promote the essential role of women in peace building and the eradication of war and conflict in Middle East region.

Activities:

- One of the successful projects was the election of Violet Khouri an Arab living in Israel as Mayor of the Galilean town, Kafr Yassif. The late Violet Khouri was thus one of the first Arab Mayors in the whole of the Middle East.
- Meetings in Jewish, Arab and Druze towns and villages, for the building of "Bridges" of culture and understanding with the local women.
- Arabic (for the Jews), and Hebrew language courses for the Arab women.

Challenges:

- As the first of its kind, this NGO faced much criticism and resistance from Israelis and Arabs.
- Women's struggles for peace and recognition is ignored by the media, their achievements glossed over. This included lack of media coverage of protests and marches and key peace-promoting events. Hence, the general public never hears of the women for peace movement.
- Lack of funds.

The Coalition of Women for Peace <http://coalitionofwomen.org/home/english>

This is one of the leading voices in Israel advocating for a just and viable peace between Israel and Palestine ever since its founding in November 2000, just six weeks after the current Intifada began.

The Coalition brings together independent women and nine women's peace organizations, some newly formed and others promoting coexistence since the founding of the state of Israel. The Coalition is made up of a mix of Jewish and Palestinian women (citizens of Israel only).

Goals

The Coalition of Women for Peace seeks to mobilize women in support of human rights and a just peace between Israel and its Arab neighbours. Working to strengthen democracy within Israel, Coalition of Women for Peace aims to

- End the occupation of Palestine.
- Ensure the full involvement of women in negotiations for peace.
- Establish the state of Palestine side-by-side with the state of Israel based on the 1967 borders.

- . Pressure Israeli government to recognize its share of responsibility for the results of the 1948 war, and cooperate in finding a just solution for the Palestinian refugees.
- . Oppose to the militarism that permeates Israeli society.
- . Guarantee equality, inclusion and social and economic justice for Palestinian citizens of Israel.

ACTIVITIES:

- . mass rallies, human rights campaigns, outreach, and advocacy activity.
- . Provide emergency supplies to women and children in refugee camps, and school supplies to thousands of Palestinian children.
- . Annual report 2006 “Lift the Siege of Gaza!” Campaign

Iraqi women’s league <http://www.iraqiwomenleague.org/>

With the fall of dictatorship, Iraq fell under US occupation, which brought with it new political and social crises affecting all Iraqi men and women. The destruction of the principal structures of the Iraqi government and the refusal of occupying forces to relinquish political power and recognize Iraqi national sovereignty, has led to the deterioration of the security situation in Iraq.

