



Part one: Women and conflict in the middle east

Isabel Hilton: Hello and welcome to openDemocracy's podcast, which this week is coming to you from Galway on the west coast of Ireland where we have come to document an extraordinary event. We have been invited to take part in and record the first conference of the Nobel Women's Initiative.

Only 12 women have won the Nobel Peace Prize since it started. Seven of them are still alive. One is under house arrest and one is running for president. The remaining five are right here. With them are some of the world's most influential activists, researchers, academics and professionals, all of them women who have come to Ireland to talk about war, peace, security, justice, and how to change a world in which all of the above, except war, are in short supply.

So as this conference got under way, what were they expecting?

Woman: Inspiration and being energized by all these wonderful women who are here. Renewing hope and pledges for continuing the work.

Woman 2: I think the same - inspiration and insight, a deeper level of insight into what are the situations on the ground and what can the international community and myself as an individual do to bring about change. Even if you are in the room you can feel the energy level just sitting around these great women and experts, each in their field.

Woman 3: I think you can feel a very positive and cordial energy in the room and I am really hoping to meet and make links with other women around the world and find ways in which our work can complement each other and try and make a difference for some of the really difficult situations other women are in around the world.

Woman 4: This initiative will go beyond this conference and allows us to consolidate the linkages from local to global and change in the lives of women and then also the life in Burma especially, where I come from.

Isabel Hilton: This all began when Jody Williams, a Nobel Laureate and landmines campaigner met Shirin Ebadi, a Nobel Laureate, lawyer and judge. They realized that if all the women who had won the prize acted together then maybe they couldn't be ignored. Wangari Maathai, Mairead Corrigan Maguire, Betty Williams and Rigoberta Mench all came on board.

The only woman missing from the Initiative is Aung San Suu Kyi, who is still under lock and key in Burma. Of course, all the Nobel Peace Prize winners are meant to be working for the piece, so I asked Mairead Maguire why it took the women to come up with the idea of using their collective weight like this.



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Mairead Corrigan Maguire: Well, I think that many of the issues that we are looking at are issues that women suffer tremendously. Perhaps they have no voices. I am thinking of in war now, women and children are the main victims of war. We hear about the rapes and the displacements.

So our emphasis would be to try to give a voice to women and children in situations where their voice is not being heard.

Isabel Hilton: There has been a sense in this morning's session that it is men who make war and women who make peace. Do think that's entirely fair?

Mairead Corrigan Maguire: No, it's not entirely fair because really war starts in our heads. It's when we allow ourselves to believe that we have a right to take human life and that we arm ourselves against others.

Down through history, men have gone to war and women have supported it and often encouraged it and often glorified war. I think we are coming into a new age now and we are coming to a new realization that war has had its day. There is an alternative of nonviolent conflict resolution and we close the chapter against war and nuclear weapons. We open it to a new reality that the human family can live together without killing each other. Men and women need to play that role.

Isabel Hilton: One has the sense this morning that these are very powerful women. They are very active and engaged women. But, frankly, the larger picture is not very encouraging right now. How do you square that?

Mairead Corrigan Maguire: Well you see I think the larger picture is very encouraging because tragically what we see is just the tip of the iceberg. We see the violence that is going on tragically in places like Iraq and Palestine and Sudan and Africa.

But we don't see the millions and millions of ordinary men and women who every day get up in the morning. They don't kill anyone. They go about looking after their families and trying to work in a peaceful way. So I think we need to see that there is always another side to the mountain. And in order to help us change the world to a more social and a more just world we need to recognize that we are not doing this on our own now.

There are millions and millions of people around the world working for human rights and environmental issues and justice. We need to link up together and support each other.

Isabel Hilton: You were doing this for many years here in Ireland in conflict that lasted many decades and took many lives. What do you have to say now to women who are here who live in countries in conflict who are perhaps facing many of the same problems that you did?

Mairead Corrigan Maguire: Well, I would want to say to them to believe passionately in peace. Peace is possible. Indeed it is the only thing that will solve the problems we are facing.



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When we started in the mid-1976 in Northern Ireland, we were on the brink of civil war. A few people came out and said, "Stop the violence. Enough is enough. There is an alternative. We want peace."

Today in Northern Ireland we have our devolved government, partial executive. We are beginning to solve the very deep problems that we have inherited through an unnecessary almost 40 years of violence. So I would say to people, "Wherever you live, believe passionately in peace. Take a stand for it. And use the techniques of nonviolent conflict resolution to solve the problem with which you are faced, because it does work."

Isabel Hilton: Many of the women here are living in war zones, so coming to Ireland where the long-running conflict is no longer enacted through violence, is particularly resonant. They have come to talk about the Middle East, where women are not so fortunate. We have heard powerful testimony about the effects of war on the lives of women in Iraq, Jerusalem and Palestine.

Two women from East Jerusalem told me about their lives and the violence they live through. First, Natasha Khalid, then Professor Nadera Shalhoub Kevorkian.

Natasha Khalid: As a mother now of two daughters, I am constantly fearful of the inability to protect my daughters at home and of the constant search for human security because as you know, the Israeli army just can extend its hand and reach anywhere in the occupied Palestinian territories. It is a constant fear for mothers.

Also the feeling of being isolated and surrounded by a physical wall - it's not only physical but also a psychological wall - and the feeling of being on another spot of the world where nothing moves and nothing develops. On the contrary it goes back and back. There are so many restrictions, physical and mental. So it is basically losing your humanity and every day trying to find your way.

Nadera Shalhoub Kevorkian: Suffering, suffering, suffering, but then the power of women never ceases to amaze me. The way they create hope, the way they create opportunities, the way they help out their kids, the way they help out themselves, the innovative ideas in every single act and every single practice of the day, never ceases to amaze me.

As a person who studies and who is also a clinician who works with women, when you ask them what they are doing and how they are dealing with it, it is very powerful. It is very strong. I wish that the world could listen and learn from their voices in order to build bridges to understand the connection between the suffering from one side but the agency and the power and the resistance and the positive resistance from the other side.

Isabel Hilton: Can you give me an example of what you mean?



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Nadera Shalhoub Kevorkian: Yeah. For example, one of the issues that I am currently studying is the issue of the house demolition and the effect of house demolition on Palestinian women. As you might know, most of the writings, most of the publications, most of the coverage in the documentation on the issue of house demolition was looking at purely the human rights discourse and whether it is a violation of the international law, international humanitarian law, whether it is a violation of the legal system in Israel, whether it is something that is extralegal, and so on.

I looked at the way Palestinian women look at the issue of house demolition. And all of a sudden I discovered a totally different world. First of all you discover that the issue of demolition doesn't start with the act of demolishing a house. They talk about the demolition before the demolition. The fear, the threat, the anxiety, not knowing when they are going to come and demolish the house, the way the family gets displaced, the way they decide not to have kids because they are afraid of this. They decide to impose the marriage on one young girl because they don't know whether economically they will be able to support her.

The whole discussion changes though. The demolition before the demolition of a house and its gender effect is very, very painful and very hard.

Then you look at the demolition during the demolition. One of the things I have learned regards the psychosomatic effect of the demolition on young girls. In one of the cases with which I was working, they came in and they asked the family to evacuate the house in half an hour. One young girl who was eight years old ended up having her menstruation - eight years old, prior. It is also because of the fear and the anxiety that accompanies the demolition.

Secondly, one of the girls ended up fearing the demolition and getting so upset that she climbed on the long electricity wire. We couldn't get her down and she ended up having hysterical blindness.

Then you look at the demolition following the demolition. What happened to the family? Who is there for the family? You know, so many hardships and being in the war zone and being in the conflict zone and facing the restrictions from all levels is not something easy at all.

You hear it from girls that are unable to go and reach school because they are afraid that the Israeli soldiers will sexually harass them. They are harassing them. And the millions of stories and rumors and gossip surround it. What did they do? They are calling them names and they are harassing them. Some might call it sexual harassment. Some might not. But it is affecting everything in our lives.

The militarization of our roads, of our way to school, of our ability to reach the clinic, of our ability to our baby safely - do you know how many women have their babies on the checkpoint in cars or inside the homes? So when you talk about conflict zones and violence against women, our bodies are becoming a boundary marker.



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Israeli soldiers are using us. Palestinian men are trying to show that they are strong. There is this constant emasculation of the men, and the psychology of humiliation ends up affecting the family and affecting the man. And who is paying the price on our bodies and our lives? It is like this weaponization of our body. This is how I call it - using our bodies as weapons in this modern war. And nobody sees it. Nobody sees it.

In house demolition they see a legal action. And in the loss of a child and they say something like, "Oh, he threw a stone." But this is much more than this. And this dynamic of power that is really affecting us as women should be looked at with more in-depth analysis. Women have the ability to look at it.

Isabel Hilton: Coming here to a gathering of women, some of whom are in conflict and some of whom are not, what can this meeting do for someone who is living as you do?

Nadera Shalhoub Kevorkian: I hope and believe we will be able to make a difference. But in my heart, the global hegemonic power, the economic strangulation on Palestinians, what is going on in Lebanon, what is going on in Iraq, it is very sad. It is very sad.

I feel this is the first time in my life I feel there is a sense of total nakedness and that with all knowledge that I have, and all the power, my only power comes from women in the field, from Palestinian women -- stories and the ability to change with the little that they have. The fact is that she would like to empower her kids by small things, by choosing new threads for something that would make her child happy.

One woman - Houda lost her house. Her son kept on telling her and crying at night and having nightmares and having hardships and so on. She kept on asking me, "What should I do? He is not sleeping. He is not eating. He is not going to school. He is not this. He is being very aggressive. He wants to die and so on." Then I told her, "Houda, what do you think we should do? What do you think we should do?"

She said, "You know what? I think I have an idea." The second day she went and bought a wire and around the demolished house she put a wire and she built a small door with a key. She gave the key to her seven-year-old child and she told him, "Now nobody can step into the ruins of the house." She gave him the power.

You know, this is innovative power. This is what I want to share here. This is what I am hoping, that we will learn from the little that Houda had, and this is what she gave to her child. And we will be able to build our small windows of hope. I am hoping that we will be able to make an impact. I'm not that optimistic. I really don't know.

Isabel Hilton: Nadera Shalhoub Kevorkian, a clinician from East Jerusalem talking about her experiences of living in the occupied territories. And Natasha Khalid, from the Jerusalem Center for Women.

These are the voices you don't hear from the flak-jacketed war correspondents embedded with the troops. These are the stories from the other side and from the



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human beings whose families and communities the bombs destroy and whose very bodies have become physical and ideological battlegrounds.

If they figure at all in the doctrines of national security that drive wars forward, it is as propaganda props for one side or the other. It has happened in Afghanistan with the liberation of women, which became one of the claims that fueled the war. It is happening again in the Middle East.

So I asked Shirin Ebadi, who won the Nobel peace prize for her work on behalf of women in Iran what she thought of those claims.

Shirin Ebadi: We are not talking about the truth here. As you heard our friends who are here from Iraq who reported on the issue, you will know that the intervention of the United States proves the opposite.

On the other hand, let's look at the situation of the allies of the United States in the region. Let's look at Saudi Arabia, Pakistan or the Emirates. The situation of women in these countries is not any better. And these are all allies of the United States.

Isabel Hilton: There have been escalating tensions between the United States and Iran in recent years. What is the effect inside Iran on civil society of this increased tension?

Shirin Ebadi: The impact has actually been used in order to oppress the freedom fighters the reason for it being that whoever speaks about democracy or freedom or other issues is accused of being manipulated by the United States.

Isabel Hilton: Could you give me some examples of that?

Shirin Ebadi: For example, the feminist movement in Iran has come up with a campaign to collect signatures in order to amend the discriminatory laws against Iranian women. However, the government is using this and stopping the campaign in the name of accusing people of cooperating with the United States of America and being manipulated by the United States of America.

Isabel Hilton: Both the government of the United States and the government of Iran define security in states terms in terms of national security, in military terms. How do you define it?

Shirin Ebadi: To me security means people should have the right to express their minds. And the national resources of the country should be used for the welfare of the people, not the militarization of the country.

Isabel Hilton: There has been some discussion today about the connection between individual insecurity and wider insecurities, wider conflicts. I'm sure a lot of people think that individual insecurities, domestic violence and so on, are private matters and that wider conflicts are matters of state. Do you see a connection between the two and if you do what is it?



Shirin Ebadi: Domestic violence is a direct result of patriarchy and as we know, patriarchy is not compatible with democracy. So in a larger perspective, when we look at it in a nondemocratic society, it is patriarchy that limits freedom and that damages the rights of people. I think that as a result of the patriarchic culture what happens is that democracy will fall apart. So there won't be any national security either.

Isabel Hilton: People who look at the Muslim world from the outside tend to say that it is particularly in the Muslim world that women are oppressed and that the Muslim world has produced very little in the way of democracy and that this is a very difficult culture in which women can assert any rights at all.

You are a Muslim. You live in a Muslim country. Is it Islam? What is it that makes it so difficult across the Muslim world for women to live as they wish to?

Shirin Ebadi: Like any other religion, Islam has different interpretations. But the patriarchal interpretation of Islam prevails in Islamic countries. As a result of the patriarchal interpretation, things have become more complicated and make things for women harder to live.

Other religions have different interpretations as well. Look at the West. One church marries homosexuals any other church doesn't even want to let them in. So those are different interpretations of the same religion.

Therefore what is used against women and results in discriminatory laws against women is the patriarchal interpretation used by dictators against women.

Isabel Hilton: Do you think then it is possible to have a feminist interpretation of Islam or indeed of other religions, which tend towards patriarchy?

Shirin Ebadi: Yes, if you take a practical look at the different situations women in different Islamic countries. For example, in Saudi Arabia women cannot even drive, whereas in other countries like Indonesia and Malaysia women have even been Presidents or Prime Ministers. In Bangladesh and Indonesia women have been Prime Ministers or Presidents.

Isabel Hilton: Looking at the deteriorating situation between the US and Iran, what do you hope a gathering like this can do to change the direction, if you like, of the situation?

Shirin Ebadi: A gathering like this can bring the voice of the civil societies of both Iran and the United States to the people of the world to tell them that if there is a difference between the two governments, they can resolve it through dialogue and negotiations, not by killing people.

Isabel Hilton: Shirin, you mentioned a project of yours to erect a different kind of War Memorial. Can you tell me what it is you want and what effect you think it will have on the way people think about war?



Shirin Ebadi: With the statue that will be made of the unknown victims of war, we are going to first denounce war. And secondly, we are going to remind people what war is and how it can affect people's lives.

Isabel Hilton: We have only brought you a fraction of what is happening here in this podcast. But you can hear two more podcasts now, reflecting the heated debates and the stories unfolding here, by clicking on the next podcast button. As always, you will find them on www.opendemocracy.net.

For now, on this beautiful summer evening in Galway, from me, Isabel Hilton, goodbye.