



### **Part three: what makes the difference**

Siobhan O'Connell: Hello, and welcome to the third and final openDemocracy podcast, recorded at the International Nobel Women's Initiative in Galway, Ireland. I'm Siobhan O'Connell. You can listen to our two other reports from the conference by clicking on [podcast@opendemocracy.net](mailto:podcast@opendemocracy.net).

It has been an extraordinary three days. Five of the seven women Nobel Laureates have gathered nearly 100 women activists, academics, journalists, and feminists together to discuss ways to redefine peace.

Nobel Peace Prize winners Wangari Maathai, Betsy Williams, Mairead Corrigan Maguire, Jody Williams and Shirin Ebadi have listened to and discussed with women who have stories to tell from their part of the world.

We have heard about violence and war zones, kidnapping and rape, landmines and so-called honor killings. But we have also heard about resilience and the power of women's creativity to overcome the most extreme of circumstances.

Jane Gabriel from openDemocracy has been speaking to two participants, Nancee Oku Bright from OCHA, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and Hibaaq Osman from V-Day, The Global Movement To End Violence against Women.

Jane asked Nancee what experience she had brought to the conference.

Nancee Oku Bright: One of the things that doesn't often happen at conferences like these is it you don't actually have humanitarians that are dialoguing with activists and with advocates. Humanitarians actually are operating from a very operational standpoint. We are working on the ground. We are delivering assistance. We are setting up clinics.

In my case we are negotiating access for food and water and shelter for refugees and internally displaced people. So what I bring to the table is the ability to actually speak about the operational issues that many of these activists are actually advocating for.

Jane Gabriel: Hibaaq, you work in very different circumstances, again in violence against women everywhere. What did you bring with you to the conference? What did you want to say?

Hibaaq Osman: The most important thing is to bring to the circle, which the majority of them, especially my sisters from the north, from the US and from Europe and all of that, they don't really have the opportunity to sit down, interview, live with, touch, smell, just break down with women who are in the middle of war or women who are afraid to go out of their houses or women who don't have any education, who lack that.



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So it's just basically to translate that information for them and for them to hopefully have the humility to know that they don't know.

I always use this phrase that says, 'please don't invite me to my own party'. In other words, if you are going to talk about me, talk to me first and try to understand from where I am coming. But never speak for me because I can speak for myself.

So the whole issue is that there are undercurrents between women and feminists. And the assumption is that we are all alike and that we all feel the same. Yeah, we are all women. There's no question about that. But the environment in which we grow up and who we are influences how we think and how we envision our lives and how we prioritize.

Jane: So if you want to work to reduce violence against women, what do you need to do? What works?

Hibaaq: We have to look at it from a comprehensive way. I use the word for the lack of a better word - comprehensive - because violence is not just physical violence or psychological violence.

In fact, the program that I am doing now in the Middle East is looking at violence from eight perspectives at the core of what we do and who we are as a society in which we are living.

The whole day yesterday I was trying to get that through at one point that we are a product of who we are. So it is understanding the society that you live in or that again going back to what are their priorities and giving compassion to understand people who will not trust you.

So in order to have those critical masses to support you - let's face it, unless we get the support of our own people, nothing is ever going to change. You think they are waiting for democracy to come and just to drop and to rain on them? Absolutely not.

Democracy or any of those things is a) how they translate it. It is critical masses who demand, who feel and say, "Gosh, why are we in this situation" and who understand and who know and who can feel that they have the power.

So it's building those critical masses - those of us who have a place to sleep and food to eat have the luxury to think and to spend time. We have time. I think that is all we have. I think the best contribution we can ever make to our own people is just having the time because we don't have to worry where our next food is coming from. Sitting with them, therefore getting their trust.

Today in our final stuff I don't think there was anything about trust or compassion in terms of writing the final reports. It's not because we are lacking it. But you have to remember we say men look at us as women.



But the point is because they think we are weak, because we have compassion. But we ourselves do the same thing. The touchy, feely compassion and all of this - these things are like, 'OK, what is that next thing. We shouldn't be victims.'

Jane: Nancee, from your experience, what works?

Nancee Oku Bright: One of the things that I think does work on the ground is to actually support many of the actors.

When I say actors, I mean many of the doctors for instance, who have set up hospitals and clinics and who are operating on women who have been raped and who have had traumatic fistulas where they have been shot in the vaginas. They have been shot in the breasts. They have been essentially destroyed. Their bodies have been destroyed.

We have a lot of actually men and women who are medical practitioners who are actually working on the ground supporting those people and trying to ensure that we actually have some of the legal instruments on the ground.

We have the laws on the ground and we actually influence governments, that we actually shame governments into ensuring that their people are actually protected.

That's the one thing that we tend to forget. Many of these people, many of these civilians who are on the ground, many of these women and his children are obviously in situations where there is a government, which has effective rule.

In areas where there is not a government that has effective rule, there are still rebel groups that actually has effective rule. Those are the people who one negotiates with.

So it is ensuring that those legal instruments are actually there and that there is no impunity so that when those legal instruments are in fact not respected, these people do go to jail. It you actually have things like international criminal courts where you can deal with this issue of violence and rape against women.

The other thing of course is to actually ensure that we have a database and that we actually manage to have all of the documentation so that when it comes time, when you go to something like the International Court or when you go to the local courts, you actually have documentation. It's very difficult because oftentimes rape often takes place in secrecy.

So who is the eyewitness? The eyewitness is often the woman herself. So you need to actually find ways in which you can actually get those stories out and that you actually can ensure that the people who have perpetrated these crimes actually pay for it.

Jane: There has been a lot of talk about understanding at the conference. There are 30 different countries, 80 different women, each with their own experience. Do you think your participation in this Conference has increased other people's understanding?



Nancee: I would hope that my participation has actually increased other people's understanding. I come from a country that was engaged in a civil war for over a decade, for 15 years and it actually was in crisis. The country is Liberia.

Fortunately now we actually have the first female president in Africa - Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. This is a woman who actually had to deal with rape herself. When she was imprisoned many years ago she actually had to fight against men who were hoping to rape her. In fact, she succeeded.

But what that actually meant is that she has now put in place the first law, the first rape law in Liberia. The challenge is now on the ground to actually implement that law and to implement the laws that actually now exist. That is obviously the challenge for many.

But I bring that experience as a Liberian to the table. But I also bring the experience obviously as an African who works on African issues. But fortunately I now also work on advocacy worldwide, humanitarian advocacy, ensuring that issues like Uganda are actually brought to the fore.

When we talk about child soldiers, we are not just talking about child soldiers as people who are carrying arms, but we are talking about young girls, young children who have actually been raped. They are boys and girls who are being raped in many of these areas.

The issue for me is to actually ensure that these voices get heard, and I hope that I, certainly as an African, certainly as someone who has been working on humanitarian issues for over 20 years, can actually articulate the crises, can actually give voice to the crises and give voice to those people who are actually being challenged on the ground every day.

Jane: Hibaaq, do you feel that you were listened to and heard in the last three days, and in that sense increased other people's understanding?

Hibaaq: You know, it's funny, because I was listening to my wonderful sisters from Ireland, and they were talking about compromising, giving it up, and doing this and so. And I always hear my feminist sisters saying, you know: "The person is political." So it's not a question of was I listening, did I want to be listened to; no, it was basically sharing that experience and making sure, at least I hope, that: look, there is another side to this story.

My sister's just talking about child soldiers. Tell me the experiences of these 30 countries, you know, how many countries would have child soldiers? Would they have the strategy, the thinking, would they be in their thoughts?

So the question is not: who pushed who on what? Number one, I hope I didn't come to a set agenda, about anyone. I wanted to make sure that did not happen, so that I was continuously thinking: "OK, what is my experience? What did I hear?" And experience is



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not like my personal experience, but what do I hear and gather from other women from other countries? You know, what this is.

So I hope at least that, certainly some of the things today that we were talking about; but, you have to realize, again, my sister and I are very different from our sisters who are underground, who do not have access to this kind of gatherings.

Our responsibility, not that we really have a chip on our shoulder, but we have a big responsibility, like OK, we understand the psychology of our feminist friend at those levels, because we move into those levels. How do we translate what we know in a way that they can take this seriously?

It's not a question of "African women are hungry, and they're all raped, and they're all waiting for you to come save them from themselves," absolutely not! It's like, if you chose to be someone who is going to advocate for our countries, our people, or whatever, let me tell you their story, in their own way. And may you have the compassion and the passion to take it as is.

For example, victimization is loaded; somebody said: "Violence is a choice," - extremely loaded; what does that mean, did you understand what that is? And I think that's... some of the things, when you talk... rape of a woman in Darfur, a lot of people would get it, because it's the rape of a woman. My goodness, that is travesty.

What does that mean? And I'm sure they don't mean it in a way that says: you just sit in there, and say: "OK, I'm going to declare war, and I'm going to pick up the gun..." I don't think... but THAT is how it would mean. So how do we translate that?

Being the medium, I think, is the best thing that we can possibly contribute.

Siobhan: The conference covered a wide range of issues. There was a call for action on cluster bombs, a campaign against the proposed Iraq Oil Law in the U.S., support for the Nuclear Weapons Convention, and a plan to build a statue in world capitals to commemorate the lives of women affected by war.

One of the strongest calls at this conference was for women to have a clearer voice in the media. I asked Rana Husseini, a Jordanian journalist, why this is such a significant issue for women.

Rana Husseini: I think, of course, as the debate was going on, as you've been here for three days, and you noticed that one of our main problems is that women's exposure in media in our own respective country and abroad is still limited; there is stereotyping; there are issues, very important issues that are not being highlighted in the media.

So I think it's very important that whenever we have an opportunity to be out there, to make our voices heard, we have to take advantage of that, and try, even if we don't have it, we have to create it.



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Siobhan: You've been very successful in Jordan in raising the profile of women's so-called "honor killings". What personal cause was that to you, how difficult was it to highlight that particular issue?

Rana: Actually, it wasn't difficult for me, I felt it was a mission, that I'm here on this planet for this. Maybe the only difficulty was that people in the beginning didn't believe in what I was doing, sometimes officials had to hide, officials were not very cooperative in the beginning; sometimes it was risky to go out and talk to families, talk to people who murdered their female relatives.

Sometimes it was mentally tiring for me, but all in all I think that there was not that much difficulty. I was threatened once or twice by individuals, but my belief in what I'm doing keeps me going all the time.

Siobhan: We've been hearing some terrible stories of women working under conditions of censorship, particularly in Iran. There's one particular story of an Iranian journalist who is being prosecuted for reporting a so-called honor killing, killing of a woman.

A man claiming that this journalist had defamed him by suggesting that he'd murdered a woman. As the conference draws to a close, how do you think the Nobel Women's Initiative can build on these experiences?

Rana: I think the Nobel women have an important role and grave responsibility ahead of them. I think that, what they did is that they gathered us here to hear from us, and this is something we really appreciate and cherish.

I was telling a colleague today, what is important to me is that we always hear of people winning in the Nobel Peace Prize, but we never hear from them again, or their activities are very limited, or non-existent, actually.

So I think that the gathering here, the idea that they gathered themselves and then they gathered us, I think this is something very important. And I know, I have convictions, that they will really carry our messages and they will be adopting issues, because I can tell from... I've been on a panel twice, on the podium, and looking at them, the reflection of how they are receiving what we're saying, it's obvious that they are affected, and I think they are going to make a big change.

And of course, their voices are always heard and respected because of the award that they won, it's a noble award, and I'm sure that they will carry on. They will carry our messages. Especially in Iran; because as you mentioned, in Iran and some other countries where the media are censored, I think they are going to play an important role, hopefully, in trying to change the situation in these countries.

Of course, these situations will not change overnight, but we have to continue to nag: "I need a journalist," and you know that we have to keep nagging, and this is the only way to make change.



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Siobhan: Some of the most powerful stories came from activists and journalists from Iran, who spoke through interpreters of the censorship and impossibility of communication. I spoke to Roja, student and activist from the U.S. who supports a campaign for one million signatures to change discriminatory laws in Iran. I asked her for her story.

Roja Bandari: What happened was that they have a website that has very good articles. And I read these articles in Persian first, and it was introduced to me through an email from a friend, just random email, and then I pretty much read a lot of their articles during the course of a couple of months, and then by the end I realized that I really wanted to help them out.

Siobhan: Why?

Roja: I think that this is one of the most interesting and amazing social movements that's going on in Iran. This is an independent movement, it's a civic campaign; they have this really novel method of face-to-face interaction, where the goal is to collect one million signatures to change certain laws that are very, very discriminatory to women.

It's a grassroots movement; it's from bottom up rather than top down, and the way they do it: they go into the streets and into the busses, and they speak to women face-to-face. So they just have volunteers, and that's how that works. That sounds really interesting to me.

Siobhan: You got involved because you made a personal relationship, and you've met that woman here, at the conference. Unfortunately, we can't interview her because she's worried about what might happen to her when she goes home. What was it like, meeting her?

Roja: It was great, I mean, one thing about this campaign that is really cool is that it's not hierarchical, it's like a network of well-communicated people. I just talked to her back and forth, or actually a couple of them, talked to a couple of them back and forth.

And mostly just read their articles online, and I've just been helping out a little bit, collecting signatures with our friends. But it was amazing meeting these people that I've just been reading their stuff online, and it was just amazing to meet them face-to-face.

Jane: The Iranian group or delegation or group of women here are really quite a force aren't they?

Woman: That's what I think. I think that women's issues have become something that's important in this society right now. It is something that is very active and very dynamic. And people talk about it. People agree with parts of it and disagree with parts of it but it is very alive and it is moving forward.

Jane: You have been at the conference for three days. It is coming to an end. What are you going to take home with you?



Woman: So many things. It has just been - this has been surreal. I don't even think that anybody could be present in this room with so many amazing people and not have their lives changed. There are so many things.

There are things about engineering. Of course, because I am an engineer, I think that there was stuff said about the role of technology in the cycle of violence in the world. I just would like to think about the engineering Code Of Ethics and how that relates to this whole thing.

I live in America and I care about how American women come to play into this. I don't think that American women are the evil power that maybe they are portrayed as more you think about as them being. I think the media can bully other governments.

The American media can bully other governments. They can definitely bully their own women at home. And empowering American women will also empower and increase solidarity internationally too.

Jane Gabriel: As the conference ended, Isabel Hilton managed to talk to Jody Williams, one of the key Nobel Laureates to get the conference off the ground. Jody has spent the last three days with the women talking. Isabel asked her what she was going to take away with her.

Jody Williams: We have heard many suggestions of issues that the Nobel Women's Initiative can support. We formed this Initiative precisely to use the prestige that we have had conferred upon us through the Nobel Prize and to support the work of women around the world.

We will take from this Conference those suggestions and we will make an honest assessment within the Initiative of what we can meaningfully support. I personally am of the view that if you can't make a meaningful contribution, sometimes it's more harmful than helpful. So I'm going to pay very close attention to the suggestions.

We have already been doing some of the things that were suggested, which I thought was lovely. I felt very good being able to say, "We've already done that. We've done that. We'll do that." You know.

But this is what we wanted here. We wanted to learn from we've been working around the world. We wanted to hear from them their thoughts about how we could support their work. And we are going away with that. And I am very happy.

Isabel Hilton: One of the things that struck me about being here - this is after all a Nobel Laureate's, it's an event convened by Nobel Laureates and of course the Nobel Laureates are the stars - but the style and the way this Conference has worked has been extraordinary and made me reflect on the fact that most of the male Laureates I guess are power holders of one sort or another. They tend or have been tending to conduct themselves in that manner.



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This Conference has been extraordinarily democratic to participate in. You have all been around the whole time. You have all been sitting at tables talking, arguing, all these things that one doesn't normally expect or indeed experience has taught that the stellar part of the conference doesn't do.

Do you think that this is because, again looking at the women Laureates, they have come from a different sort of political activity from most of the men who have won the Nobel Peace Prize?

Jody: I think that might be part of it. But I know participatory Nobel men. Archbishop Tutu is fabulous. He always is there. He is always ready to help. A doleful Perez Esquivel from Argentina is of that ilk - it sounds like a negative word doesn't it?

But I think it's not just a function of the kind of work that we come from. It's a function of being women. Women are more inclined to want to hear what other women have to say and want to collaborate. It doesn't mean we always agree. It doesn't mean we don't fight. But we want to move forward together.

There is always the odd one with an ego but it's pretty much not been an ego driven issue here. We really wanted to host a conference where we could hear women. We weren't here to pontificate to them. I wanted to hear what they had to tell us.

And I think it is a reflection of one of the themes that kept running through this conference. If there are more women at all levels of power, it will be more like this than like men pontificating and using their power to continue to make the world a mess.

Jane: So that's it. It's really over. It's the final night party. 80 women from around the world, five Nobel Laureates are heading off to continue the dialogue and to make clear that violence is a choice and that we have other choices to make. Here are some of the many stories we have heard collected over the last three days.

Woman: I am the president of an organization, which works with trafficked women. It is very, very difficult to have money for this organization. It is impossible. Our banks support sports and support everything else. But trafficked women - WHAT?!

Woman 2: The challenge is that not only peace issues are wimpy but also that women's issues are wimpy, a lot of women's issues.

Woman 3: Women are soft. They are entertainment. So when you are speaking to a journalist and you talk about these issues, you find even as the journalist is looking at you and asking other questions, you realize that you are fighting such an ideological barrier that does not see these as hard, real issues. It's just a human-interest story.

I constantly have to explain that we are talking about 50% of the globe. This is not a special interest.



Woman 4: I was a Member of Parliament for about 10 years. My coming into Parliament did not necessarily mean that we or I was really pro-women, women's issues, and gender issues. It took training and interaction and a linkage that you talked about to be brought on both. I believe if you could carry out these linkages it will all be a lot better to talk about not only women's issues but also issues that talk about the whole society.

Woman 5: A guy was brought to me who for seven months did not have a permit to go and work. Then they gave him the permission. He has 11 kids. He was so happy. He took his 16-year-old son and he went to work.

At the checkpoint the soldiers told him the condition of his leaving the village was if he barks. He barked like a dog. He barked in order to go and have some money for his kids. This guy ended up having a nervous breakdown.

The question is how do you live with this vicious violence in such an immoral and unethical context and atmosphere. And how could you behave in the jungle in a civil manner?

This is a question that bothers me a lot because I am capable of hitting someone. If he comes close to my girls - everything in my life starts with my girls. They are the apples of my eye. If somebody would come that close to them, I am capable of hitting and killing even, if they would hurt my kids.

Now this is the question - how could you pass the word that it is not that I am a violent person. I'm not. I'm not. But the moment someone comes for the people that are precious to me, that are my girls, my kids - I think it turns me into a different person.

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