

Lecture: The Middle East Conflict: Is there a feminist solution

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The following text is the transcribed speech of

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I've had four wonderful days here in Berlin, not only seeing your beautiful city, but also meeting really exceptional people who have been very active promoting the causes that I believe in so deeply: feminism, peace, social justice, environmental issues. So for me it really has been inspiring to participate in this conference and thanks again to RLS for inviting me.

The Coalition of Women for Peace

My name is Gila Svirsky and I am an activist with the Coalition of Women for Peace. I would like to tell you a little bit about the Coalition and then show you a film of twenty minutes length about the work of the Coalition. Afterwards we talk some more. The Coalition of Women for Peace was founded six years ago in November 2000 and brought together nine women's peace organisations that already existed. I will mention a few of the organisations that are in the Coalition so you will have an idea - if you want more details about anything you can see our website <http://coalitionofwomen.org>

First I mention Women in Black, which is an organisation of women that puts on black clothes every week at Friday at one o'clock for one hour and stands silently in very public places in Israel holding a sign that says "End the occupation!" We do it in Jerusalem, in Tel Aviv, in Haifa, and in additional locations in Israel. Only one hour and only this sign "End the occupation!" We began Women in Black nineteen years ago and we have been there every single Friday for nineteen years.

The second organisation is Bat Shalom. "Bat Shalom" means "daughter of peace". We hold dialog groups between Bat Shalom women and Palestinian women of our sister organisation which is called "The Jerusalem Center for Women". The Palestinian and the Israeli women together meet and talk about the very difficult issues that are fronting us solving the conflict. One of those issues is what to do about Jerusalem. Both sides want Jerusalem as their capital. Another issue is what to do about the refugees. A third issue is what to do about the settlements. So through dialog Palestinian and Israeli women together have forged solutions to these very difficult issues. And they have done these years before the men did it in the so called "Oslo peace process". The women of Bat Shalom and the women of The Jerusalem Centre for Women signed peace agreements stating how to address these issues before Arafat and Rabin shook hands on the white house lawn.

A third example of a member organisation is Machsom Watch. "Machsom" means checkpoint. The checkpoint is where there is immediate friction between Israeli soldiers and Palestinians. Palestinians have to pass through many checkpoints every day: The checkpoint outside the village, the checkpoint in the road between the villages and finally the checkpoint leading into the next village. Make no mistake: The checkpoints do not separate Palestine from Israel, there are only about ten such checkpoints that separate Palestine from Israel, but there are several hundred

checkpoints that separate the people inside of Palestine. It separates Palestinian area from Palestinian area. Some of these are checkpoints with soldiers. Some of these are just big boulders that are only placed to prevent Palestinians from moving from one location to another location. The women of Machsom Watch go to the checkpoints and try to facilitate the passage of Palestinians who are crossing. Sometimes the soldiers see legal papers that allow the Palestinians to pass but they will not allow them to pass. So the women try to help, make sure that they are able to pass. Sometimes there are no papers but an emergency, for example a woman had to give birth and she must go from her village to the hospital. In this case the Machsom Watch women talk to the soldiers. If they do not allow her, the women call the commanding officer. The women are Israeli so they talk Hebrew. They talk to the officers and do everything possible to make sure that the Palestinians are allowed to reach the other side.

So those are three examples of organisations. Now I want to show you a film. The film does not describe the organisations. What the film does is showing you several examples of actions of the women's peace movement.

In the conference someone said we must figure out how to resist occupation in ways that are strong but not violent. And so we are always looking for such ways and in this film you will see nine examples.

Comments on special scenes of the film

First scene - We started to push and the soldiers started to push back. We had a big truck full of medicine and food and finally the truck started to move but the soldiers opened fire with tear gas and stun grenades, coming from all directions against this crowd of women. And then at some point many of us, the Israeli women, many Jewish, many Palestinian citizen of Israel were injured, but we got the truck free. Twenty-three women ended up in hospital at that demonstration.

Second scene - The scene that follows is a scene where women painted their hands in red like blood and we marched through the streets of Tel Aviv. Very dramatic! They were chanting "How many children did you kill today, Sharon?"

Third scene - In the next scene we were breaking through the wall at Tulkarem when there were Palestinian women on the other side. We were on the Israeli side and the soldiers said we cannot go through. First we negotiated, then we pushed and finally we did get through and we delivered school supplies for the children of Tulkarem because it was the beginning of the school year. We delivered about two thousand book bags, with pencils and papers and things like that. We had message also in Arabic: "Israeli women are very angry about the situation that you cannot go to school and we are hoping that you will be able to use these books and papers for the school year and we wish you a good school year."

Fourth scene - In the next scene there is a small demonstration of fifty women, a mixture of Israeli Palestinian and Internationals. This was in a small village where the wall was being erected and the women came to protest. As the women approached, the military was protecting the construction of the wall. So, as the women approached, the men of the army pointed their weapons at us and the women began with their speeches "We are here as a non-violent demonstration, women, Palestinian, Israeli and Internationals for peace, we ask you not to shoot, we are only going to speak together words of peace!" And then of course the soldiers started shooting and horses came through and started to run down the women. Several women were injured, one woman had her shoulder broken. And

then it ends with the scene in Tulkarem, where Israeli women are on the one side and Palestinian women on the other side. We did not know each other but when we broke through the gate with the school bags, the Tulkarem women welcomed us as if we were sisters they haven't seen for years. There's a beautiful picture of two women embracing, who don't know each other, and at the bottom you see a motto of our movement: "We refuse to be enemies".

So again, the film is about all kinds of different actions to state and demonstrate to the Israeli government and the Israeli army that the occupation is unacceptable and we will be strong and protest against it, non violent protest. So, before I talk a little more about the movement in general I thought I will explain to you why women prefer to do that.

Why do we need a peace movement of our own?

Ok, I thought the question should be asked why do we need a peace movement of our own? There is also a women's peace movement in the United States called Code Pink. Is there in Europe also a women's peace movement? I know there is a women's peace movement in the areas of Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Slovenia. They were very active during the war. Do you have any close touch to there? Ok, now - let me explain why we need our peace movement of our own. First of all there is an obvious reason: When there is a mixed gender peace movement, they never invite women to speak at the rallies. It's pretty obvious and it's a low level reason but it's true in many places. For us it felt terrible - we were the largest number of people participating at the demonstrations, more women than men, and they never had women speak from the stage. The woman could be a moderator or she could sing the song in the end. But she wouldn't be making the speeches! So that was very irritating for us. The mixed gender peace movement didn't feel that women were part of the discussion and decision making.

In the Women's Peace Movement the structure is flat, it's not hierarchic. It is an opportunity to empower each other. We share the work, we share the glory, and we share the results. We also have no official spokeswoman, everyone is the spokeswoman of the movement. When she speaks to others, if she talks about ideology, she is careful to say: This is my ideology, there are other women in the movement who believe other things. So that is of course important.

And a third reason is because our approach and our ideology are much broader in scope than the approach and ideology of the mixed gender movement. It is not just about ending the occupation, about division. It is also about future cooperation. Let me give you an example: We say that the city of Jerusalem must be a shared capital for both Israel and Palestine. It must not be divided again or if it is divided, the Arab neighbourhoods of Jerusalem will be the capital of Palestine. And the Jewish neighbourhoods of Jerusalem will be the capital of Israel. We say: Do not divide Jerusalem! Leave it as one city, but it will be considered both the capital of Palestine and the capital of Israel. Typically for women, we don't see it as a problem that two different countries have one and the same city as their capital. We think about sharing. Another example: The women's Peace Movement talks about a resolution to the problem of the refugees. We cannot have absolute justice with the refugees. If we want absolute justice for refugees, it means that there will be injustice caused to the Israeli civilians in Israel. This is certainly a complex problem and there is no easy solution. If you want, we can talk about some of the possible solutions later on.

The mixed gender movement would like to see separation: Palestinians here, Israelis there; lock the door and throw away the key. The feminist peace movement says: There will be separation, there will be 2 states, but there will be a porous border because we will have a future that is shared. We will have cooperation in the future. We will ensure the development of Palestine just as we ensure the development of Israel. We must invest in their well being. If they do not feel that the solution is just, it will not be a stable peace. Today the average Israeli earns ten times more - per person - than the average Palestinian; the gross national product is ten times higher per person than the gross national product of Palestine. It's not only wrong, it's also politically stupid. It will lead to instability in our relationship if we continue the growth disparity between Palestine and Israel. So we must invest in the development of Palestine. But the Women's Peace Movement moves beyond all of these issues of Palestine and Israel. The Women's Peace Movement, and this is where we turn truly feminist, says: Peace is only one part of the problem. The larger picture is global. The larger picture includes the economic aspects. The larger picture includes the inequality that derives as a result of this conflict. I will give you some examples of each of those:

The impact of war and occupation

Let's start with the equality. Because Israel and Palestine are at war women have less equality or no equality with men. Why? Because when one country is at war with another country the men become the heroes. The men become the guys who risk their lives, working hard to protect us, and the women become the supporting actors. The women become the ones who wash their laundry when they come home for the weekend and feed them well and hug them and love them, so they can go back and fight the enemy. It's not only when they are soldiers, it's also after they are soldiers: They come home and they get the good jobs. They don't only become Prime Minister of Israel - all the Prime Ministers except this one have been big generals - but even little jobs. If you were an officer in the army or just a fighter, you walk through the door of your next job interview and you say: "I fought in Jenin", and you have a better chance than a woman who walks in and says "I did his laundry". Therefore the views of men and the status of men are validated and esteemed more when there is a war than when there is peace. So that's one good reason why women have to work to end the occupation.

Another problem is economic. When the country is pouring billions of Euros into a war, it is not taking care of its civilian population. If you are a country that has a limited amount of money, even a rich country, you are not dealing with your social problems when you have your army sitting in Iraq. So too in Israel. We are not giving enough support to our educational system, our hospitals, our social programs. There are many ways in which this war is draining these. Needless to say that the poor become poorer, the poor have fewer and fewer programs that they can use to alleviate their misery. Therefore there is a very strong economic aspect of the war. I don't have to tell you, that the amount of nuclear radiation that is entering the soil of Palestine and Israel as the result of the occupation is horrendous. There is pollution of the soil. The water supply is not being shared equitably, 80 percent of the water in the occupied territories goes to Israel, and Israelis are only ten percent of the population of the occupied territories.

In so many ways the impact of the occupation is much bigger than just a war between Palestine and Israel. And that's why the Women's Peace Movement says:

1. End the occupation!

2. Make Jerusalem a shared capital!
3. Find a just solution to the refugee problem!
4. Bring back all the settlements behind the '67 lines!
5. Make economic justice in Israel for Israel's poor!
6. Make sure that there is equality for women, make sure that there is equality for all Israel Arab citizens, and make sure that there is equality for the minorities in Israel!

So if you want to see all these aspects of our ideology in a few lines, look up at our website and there will be a full listing and explanation. You will see there all the events that have to do with justice for the poor, we ourselves organized gay and lesbian festivals in last June. We have been instrumental in some of the environmental actions. All these things we see as a part of one fabric and that one fabric is peace and justice, equality for all.

More activities

I say one more word what we do in addition to this kind of activities: There are several key communities in Israel, who do not want to end the occupation. The Women's Peace Movement decided to identify these communities and make the effort to reach them and promote peace among them. One of those groups is the Russian speaking Israelis. In Israel about twenty percent of the population is Russian speaking. Many of them support right wing positions. Their newspapers are entirely right wing. Many do not read Hebrew and it's easy to be a Russian in Israel and never speak Hebrew. You will be exposed only to racist and fascist newspapers and television programs. There is a whole TV-channel just in Russian and several radio programs. We do seminars where we invite Russian speaking women and give them lectures. We have Palestinian women who studied in Moscow who speak to them in Russian and talk to them about peace and about the importance of not hurting and oppressing minorities. Russian Jews were an oppressed minority in Russia. The Palestinian women talk to them in Russian about the oppressed minorities of Israel and the Palestinians and at the end of the speech they say: "By the way - I am Palestinian". You can imagine the shock that goes through the audience when they say this. We also hold workshops for Russian speaking women once a week or every two weeks. They talk to them about the issues that are of concern to them such as prejudice against Russians in Israel. Most Israeli think that Russian speakers are all involved in crime or in sex trafficking business. And so they discuss among themselves how to end prejudice against Russians. Meanwhile we introduce into the conversation the prejudice against Arab Israelis - we introduce the racism against Palestinians. We have weekly workshops and talk about all these things, it's really an opportunity to get into in depth discussion and work with them. We have a theatre group in Russian that prepares plays about these subjects, shows the plays and discuss afterwards. There are many different ways how we do outreach to Russian speakers.

We have a second program that does outreach to disadvantaged women in the peripheral areas of Israel. These are women that are poor, some of them are single mothers, some are unemployed. We run empowerment programs, skills training, all sorts of training, we also bring them to visit Arab neighbourhoods in Tel Aviv. This city is so far away from them, so we say "How about making a trip to Tel Aviv?" - "Yeah, that's great!" - And of course Tel Aviv doesn't mean only showing them the

beautiful beaches and expensive hotels but also taking them to Jaffa, to meet with Arabs and having a tour of Jaffa. This group has been so powerful, one of the women in this group actually ran for mayor last month (and won!).

A third program is something we call Reality Tours. Most Israelis have never seen the Separation Wall, so we take them on a bus and we promise them not to talk about politics, we are just going to show them the wall because we know they are interested in seeing it. There are special trained guides who take them to the wall and then they see that Palestinians live on this side and Palestinians live on that side of the wall. They never realized that before. We bring them into the home of one of our Palestinian families and they sit in the home. It's the first time they ever met a Palestinian. I too, was 43 years old when I met my first Palestinian. There is complete separation. So they are sitting in a Palestinian home, drinking tea and they are seeing two very nicely dressed adults with a child, also very nicely dressed and clean. This completely shatters their stereotypes of what a Palestinian is like and then Palestinians tell them that their orchards are on the other side of the wall and they can't reach them. We spend the whole day visiting people and seeing the wall and at the end of the day -again: No politics! - We take them to a little place where we sit together and the guide says: "So, what do you think?" And they say: "Oh, it's so interesting, such a tall wall, nice family", and one of them says: "Yes, a very nice family, I think this wall is making them very angry and bitter, even make them hate Israel, because it separates them. I don't know if that is so smart." And then the next person will say: "Yeah, I thought the same thing, but I wasn't sure if I should say it, but now that you said it, I do so too." And pretty soon there are several people who have begun to change their point of views - not the whole group, some of them will still say it's important, even though it makes them angry it is important. We know this is a good program, because after people have been on this program they send their friends and relatives. So far 4000 Israelis have participated in these tours. And we hope that many more will do so in the future.

The fourth program we call Reframing Security. You say security means killing terrorists; you say security means powerful weapons. We say that security is more than that! What did security once mean? We ask people, what is security to you? - "Security is having a job", "Security? I am a woman, so I can walk in the street and feel safe." There are all different kinds of securities. Everybody has a different idea what security is and suddenly people understand that security is a wide range of many different things. And after many conversations you bring them to the understanding that if they want security of all these different kinds then they also will have to get security with our Arab neighbours. And to get security with our Arab neighbours is to make peace with them, because until we will make peace with them we will not have security. So the point of this program is to convince Israelis that the best form of security is making peace and until we make peace we will not have all the forms of security.

Impressions from the discussion

Question: You said that one reason why there is a Women's Peace Movement is, that men are in the army. But women are in the army in Israel, too. Please tell us about the division of labour in the army. Is there a strong division? Are women only making the "women jobs", like teaching languages or guarding national parks - which are their duties in the army?

Gila: In the army itself there's a clear division of labour: Men do the tanks, the airforce, and infantry and women are secretaries. Also, not every woman goes to the army. If you say you are religious, you can get out. If you say, I am the only daughter and my mother has 5 children, she needs my help, you can get out. But there is a clear status difference between boys and girls in the army.

Question: Is there any progress?

Gila: The question is how you define progress. Yes, there is more equality to kill. There is one woman who is a fighter who flies helicopters. But from my perspective as a feminist or in my understanding of feminism I would like to see no one in the army, not young men and not young women.

Here is the bottom line: Everytime you say to another person: End the siege of Palestine, end the occupation of Palestine, end the occupation of Iraq, you are educating the entire world.

Women are very powerful! We are secret agents of peace. Everytime you educate your child or speak to your patient in your clinic or talk to your secretary or your boss, you are a secret agent in a powerful army of women for peace. We have made change and we will make change. It is not fast and it is not instant, but it is definitely achievable. All we need is to do all we can wherever we are. And thank you also to the wonderful men of the world who make peace. And thank you for coming.

For further information: www.coalitionofwomen.org

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