

Working towards the Globalization of Peace

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I want to speak about women under occupation in Palestine and Iraq. As we are caught in the clutches of war, speaking about ending violence against women means combating violence not only at the local and national level but also at the global level. Global forms of violence range from capitalist globalization to occupation, wars and militarization, and women in the 'third world are the primary victims of these forms of violence.

If we as women claim to care about violence affecting women, then I would expect us to have some sort of agreement on what defines violence and what qualifies as a threat to women. Can we agree that economic globalization is a form of violence against women? Do we think that the preemptive war, which the United States of America - residing over the largest military arsenal in history - waged against Iraq, in violation of international law, was a form of aggression against Iraqi women? And finally, can we agree that the Israeli occupation of Palestine - the only colonialist occupation that still exists in this day and age - constitutes a form of violence against Palestinian women?

Let's consider some of the effects of military conflicts, continued occupation, chaos and absence of security on

the daily lives of women. Today, under the US occupation in the "liberated" Iraq, women are afraid to go out. Iraqi women suffered tremendously and for decades under the previous regime, but according to a senior UN official they are worse off now, if that is possible to imagine. The poor security situation presents a direct threat to their personal safety. Young women cannot walk the streets without male relatives accompanying them because of the increase in instances of rape, attacks and kidnapping.

Scarier still is the rise of religious forces in Iraq under US occupation. While not all religious forces are reactionary, those that are, advocate traditional attitudes about women's role in society. The American appointed Iraqi Governing Council - obviously not an elected body - recently passed what is known as resolution 137, designed to install religious laws in place of the Iraqi civil code dealing with personal status laws. The Iraqi Governing Council, an interim entity appointed by the occupation authority, has no legitimate powers to change Iraqi civil law, a culmination of 50 years of struggle by Iraqi women and progressive forces in Iraq, not the product of Saddam Hussein's regime. Resolution 137 amounts to a direct attack on Iraqi women's rights. In response to this resolution, a large number of Iraqi women took to

the streets protesting it. Consequently it was repealed, at least for the time being.

Shifting to the occupation of Palestine, let's ask ourselves, what is life like for Palestinian women living under the Israeli occupation? It would indeed be stating the obvious to say that the Israeli occupation and aggression have a very negative impact on the lives of Palestinian women who have been the victims of massacres, rape, ethnic cleansing, economic blockade, torture, confinement, curfews and school closures. Countless numbers of Palestinian mothers have been forced to deliver still born babies at Israeli checkpoints because Palestinian ambulances aren't allowed to pass through to nearby hospitals. And this is routine procedure. The rights of Palestinian women and their families are impossible to realize under these circumstances. These women are only able to exercise the full range of their rights when they live in free communities and in a society free from military conflicts and occupation.

Palestinian women have always been politically active on the nationalist front and the gender equality front. They have been aware of the link between homegrown patriarchy and the Israeli occupation in the sense that both are instances of dominance of one group over another. Seeing the close link between their feminist and nationalist struggles, they have organized, mobilized and have been very active in the national liberation movement and in women's rights organizations.

The Palestinian resistance against the Israeli occupation has been sustained to a large degree by the resourcefulness of Palestinian women. During the first Intifada in the late 1980's and early 1990's, Palestinian women took

a pioneering role in the campaign to boycott Israeli products in the occupied territories. With no pre-existing indigenous industry to fall back on, Palestinian women took it upon themselves to provide alternative sources of income and products. They began establishing their own manufacturing industries from cheese and jam making to bread baking and cultivating community gardens. In doing so, not only did they enable the boycott campaign and made it possible to succeed, but actually developed a nucleus for the infrastructure of a Palestinian economy.

International women's organizations interested in playing a role in combating the oppression facing Palestinian women as women have to recognize the connection between patriarchy and occupation that manifests itself in the daily lives of women and integrate this connection in the theory, practice and agenda of the international women's movement.

It is important at this moment in our history to be politically informed and to be aware of what's going on in the world and of the role governments plays in world events affecting women. Critical political knowledge is central to developing oppositional spaces and cultures of resistance where critical thinking can function at a time when policing mechanisms are tightened and a demagogical discourse of national security and terrorism is sweeping our public space.

Finally, being politically aware and being committed to issues of social justice is of essence. The women of Palestine and Iraq need us to stay informed, committed and to make people aware of the oppression they face. They need our solidarity in their effort to end the occupation so they can live in free communities.

Forthcoming: Young Arab Women