

BRIEF COMMUNICATION



THE FIRST INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF THE NOBEL WOMEN'S INITIATIVE: WOMEN REDEFINING PEACE IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND BEYOND

REBECCA BARLOW

Monash University, Victoria, Australia

The Nobel Women's Initiative (NWI) was formed in August 2006. It was a response to a suggestion by Iranian laureate Shirin Ebadi that women recipients of the Peace Prize should collectively endeavor to use the power and influence concomitant with being Nobel laureates to advance the cause of women internationally, by bringing their voices and experiences to the direct attention of the international community and media sources. NWI represents an attempt to help fill a gap that mars the present system of international relations. Over the past half-century, global standards have developed in earnest. One of these standards is women's equality with men. Despite the codification of this precept in international law, gender discrimination against women remains a globally unresolved problem. Women are seriously underrepresented at local, national, regional, and international levels of governance, and their voices and experiences remain marginalized from negotiations toward conflict

JOURNAL OF MIDDLE EAST WOMEN'S STUDIES
Vol. 4, No. 1 (Winter 2008) © 2008

resolution and the formation of viable democratic institutions.

The First International Conference of the Nobel Women's Initiative, "Women Redefining Peace in the Middle East and Beyond," was held in Galway, Ireland, on May 29–31, 2007. This was a gathering of over 80 of the world's leading activists and scholars on women's empowerment and gender equality. It provided women from more than 40 countries an opportunity to share their experiences of discrimination and oppression, exchange strategies that have improved women's conditions, and discuss how best to work together to demand a central place for women at the negotiating table of the peace process and political liberalization. The Middle East was chosen as the contextual focus of the conference precisely because the region is widely characterized by conflict and political repression. Under such circumstances, women's rights and human security are readily sacrificed on the altar of "national security" and unqualified allegiance to the nation-state.

Importantly, the conference was designed to challenge the stereotype that women are the exclusive "victims" of conflict, and passive subjects of systematized oppression. This view represents what Hilde Lindemann Nelson (*Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair*, 2001) might call a master narrative, those "stories found lying about in our culture" that present as summaries of human experiences. The master narratives of conflict and what does or does not constitute meaningful participation in the politics of the nation-state are deeply gendered. Almost universally throughout history, men have been presented as heroes of war and protectors and defenders of the state. Conversely, women have been construed as "victims" in need of protection, whose primary role is to keep the homefires burning while awaiting the return of their menfolk from the battlefield. Fulfilling its proposed agenda, the NWI conference facilitated discussions that generated what Nelson would call "counter stories," that is, stories that resist the stereotypes of a master narrative and attempt to replace them with axes of identity that demand respect.

The organizing principle of NWI's First International Conference was the recognition that women *are not* passive victims of conflict. Despite spiraling violence in the Middle East, women have demonstrated positive responses of resilience and non-violent creativity. NWI believes that these kinds of responses "can serve as a lens that can offer ways

women's rights, human security, and peace issues can be addressed globally" (www.nobelwomensinitiative.org).

This is an important enterprise, because the master narrative of conflict translates into serious political maladies on the ground. In their exclusive position as the ones who fight and die for society and the state, men come to be construed as full citizens with automatic citizenship rights. In the logic of the master narrative, it follows that men should determine the direction of society and the state in the postconflict climate. In contrast, women's non-participation in the physical defense of the state means that they do not have the same citizenship status as men. It correlates that women do not have the same right—or indeed capabilities—to participate in decision-making structures and postconflict negotiations.

This not only represents an extreme injustice to women; it is also anathema to possibilities of human security at large (a term that indicates the rights-based needs of men, women, and children inclusively). According to Noeleen Heyzer, Executive Director of the United Nations Development Fund for Women, "peace agreements, early recovery and post-conflict governance do better when women are involved" (UN Security Council, SC/8858, October 26, 2006). Heyzer highlighted the fact that "women know the cost of war, what it means to be subject to sexual violence designed to destroy communities, what it means to be displaced, to flee their homes and property, to be excluded from public life and regarded as less than full citizens." As a result, women tend to adopt more inclusive approaches to peace and security than men, and to address social and economic issues that might otherwise be ignored.

The latter situation has characterized post-Saddam Iraq. On the first day of the NWI conference, a leading Iraqi feminist, Yanar Mohammed, critiqued the U.S.-led (re)construction of the Iraqi government. She pointed out that at the dawn of the U.S. occupation of Iraq, there were over 400 women's NGOs registered with the government, whereas now there are only three or four. She observed that over 70 percent of television programs in the country now have a conservative Islamist agenda. Under the guidance of the Washington administration, the Iraqi constitution has been formulated along the lines of what might be described as a confessional system. According to Mohammed, "you cannot have women's rights without a secular constitution."

Mohammed posed the question, "What does this say about the United States' democracy-promotion project?" The agenda of the Bush administration does not include women's rights beyond the parameters of rhetoric. Who will support Iraqi women as they attempt to sustain their families and communities in the context of what is now widely understood to be a civil war? Her conclusion was that women-led initiatives such as the NWI conference "are the only way" to support and protect women's rights in Iraq and other conflict/postconflict societies.

In fact, there is some debate within the feminist community regarding how best to deal with the master narrative of conflict, citizenship, and women's subsequent marginalization from decision-making processes. Feminist responses to the misrepresentation of women as the exclusive "victims" of war and passive subjects of political repression have not been homogeneous. Whereas some support the equal participation of women in the military (including active battle), others emphasize the need to "work towards destabilizing the entire notion of armed conflict as an acceptable form of foreign policy" (Lorraine Dowler in *GeoJournal* 58 [2002], 161). As a participant in every session of the NWI conference, it is my understanding that the women present collectively supported the latter agenda.

Feminist support for women's equal participation in the armed forces stems from the perception that as long as women are denied the right to defend the state on the battlefield, they will never be considered equal to men in citizenship status. Thus, women should be allowed the opportunity to demonstrate their bravery alongside men, rather than remain at home as victims of the economic and social ramifications of events transpiring on the frontline. This argument rests on constricted notions of what might be considered the "frontline" of war and what constitutes defense of the state, as well as constrained understandings of what it is to be "brave" on the one hand, and a "victim" on the other.

Shirin Ebadi addressed this issue at the conference. In her paradigm, whereas war can mean the end of suffering for men, it often means the beginning of suffering for women. When a man dies in battle, the end of his life is the end of his plight. Women who survive the war have no choice but to face the struggle of postconflict reconstruction. Why then do we not consider women who survive wars "heroes"? Why aren't the women who attend to the economic burdens of society and

child-rearing responsibilities in the absence of men, both during and after conflict, praised for their bravery? Why aren't men who are often involuntarily sent to fight and die on the "frontlines" considered to be the primary "victims" of war?

Feminists have offered expanded interpretations of the frontline as "places of change and transformation" and are "reclaiming the frontline as a frontier rather than a border" (Dowler 2002, 162). These suggestions do not negate the fact that countless men have demonstrated extreme bravery during war and conflict, nor the fact that these actions merit deep reflection and respect. What is being highlighted here is the conceptual ease with which the master narrative of conflict and state citizenship can be turned on its head.

Ebadi suggested a way in which local communities might begin to pay the same respect to women who survive wars as they currently do to men who fight and die in wars. That is, the construction of a statue in all capital cities of the world to honor women as survivors of conflict. There are monuments to male soldiers in virtually every major city of the world, and typically communities are annually called upon to pay formal homage to these soldiers. Why don't we do the same for women who have carried the social and economic weight of their societies through these wars? The mental images that are most often conjured up when we observe existing war memorials tend to include war, weapons of warfare, rivalry, hostility, and death. In contrast, the statues Ebadi proposed to honor women might serve as constant reminders of human security and human sustenance.

The incredible psychological endurance of women in conflict/postconflict societies was a resounding theme of the NWI conference. Numerous participants recounted experiences in which the outbreak of conflict, sustained occupation, or political repression revealed women's agency—their assertive and innovative approaches to survival in the face of extreme hardship.

Jane Odwong Akwero attended the conference as a representative from Uganda. She explained that before the outbreak of violence in her country in the late 1990s, she was a "shy housewife, unable to talk to more than five people at once, and even then I would whisper!" In response to the tragedy that enveloped her society as a result of the rebel movement, Jane decided to take charge. She is now one of Uganda's lead-

ing peace activists, and founder of the Concerned Women's Organization for Peace and Development. She is a former member of parliament and currently a member of the National Citizenship and Immigration Board. Her conclusion from her experiences is that women possess every capacity to lead their communities toward sustainable peace, yet their voices remain marginalized in patriarchal systems of governance. She demanded that governments "just give women the window of opportunity, and they will do the rest."

A case in point is the latest initiative of the Iranian women's movement, the campaign for One Million Signatures Demanding Changes to Discriminatory Laws, discussed on the second day of the NWI gathering. Following the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Iranian women have been subjected to serious discrimination. They have repeatedly attempted to hold peaceful protests, only to be met with state-sanctioned violence and mass arbitrary arrests. The One Million Signatures campaign represents a new tactic, whereby the women's movement has initiated seminars on the effect of state laws on women's everyday lives, and engaged in door-to-door appeals to collect signatures to a statement protesting the state's current legal framework on women, to be presented to the government.

The Nobel Women's Initiative has made a promising start on bringing the voices and experiences of women into the spotlight of global political and media forces. Its first international conference was a rare and vital opportunity for women from the Middle East and beyond to express their views on what constitutes meaningful human security. This was done within a framework of information-sharing, and the exchange of best-practice strategies that have enhanced the participation of women in conflict resolution, peace building, and decision-making structures.

The discussions and findings of the NWI conference presented a strong challenge to the master narrative of conflict and state citizenship. The "counter stories" that women presented at the conference revealed that they are *not* exclusively "victims" of war, nor passive subjects of political repression. Rather, women have responded to crises and oppression with innovative, assertive, and dynamic strategies of resistance and survival.

It is incumbent on the international community to replace stereotypes imposed upon women by political master narratives with women's

own self-perceptions and lived experiences. The development and maintenance of human security across the Middle East, and elsewhere, will not be possible unless women's voices are prioritized at the negotiating table. The Nobel Women's Initiative has set out to provide a space in which this enterprise can begin to take shape.

An earlier version of this article is posted on <http://www.openDemocracy.net>.