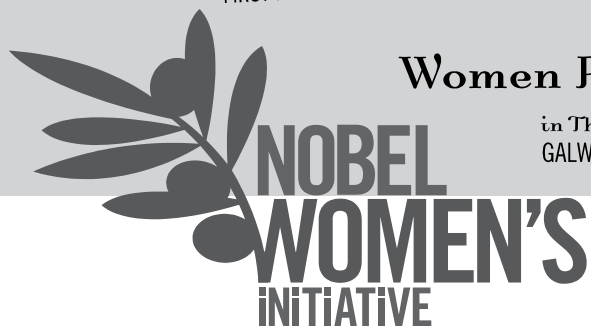




CONFERENCE  
MEDIA



FIRST INTERNATIONAL PEACE CONFERENCE



## Women Redefining Peace

in The Middle East & Beyond  
GALWAY IRELAND MAY 29-31 2007

Betty Williams, Ireland - 1976  
Máiread Corrigan Maguire, Ireland - 1976  
Rigoberta Menchú Tum, Guatemala - 1992  
Prof. Jody Williams, USA - 1997  
Dr. Shirin Ebadi, Iran - 2003  
Prof. Wangari Maathai, Kenya - 2004

*united for peace with justice and equality*

(Dublin, Ireland, June 1, 2007) Press Release

# WOMEN NOBEL PEACE PRIZE RECIPIENTS PLEDGE TO BECOME A GLOBAL VOICE IN TACKLING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND IN PEACE ADVOCACY

The women recipients of the Nobel Peace Prize have said that they intend to use their collective voice to advocate for a more prolific role for women in securing peace and combating violence around the globe.

Speaking at the conclusion of the first international conference of the Nobel Women's Initiative in Ireland today (06.01.07), the Nobel Laureates said that heretofore women's work in building peace was marginalized and largely unrecognized. They said it was now their intention to leverage the prestige of the Nobel Prize to focus on violence against women, and advocate for recognition of the many ways in which women prevent, combat and survive violence.

The Nobel Women's Initiative - which was established in 2006 - comprises six out of the seven living women Nobel Laureates. The only Laureate unable to join the initiative is Aung San Suu Kyi, who is still imprisoned in Burma.

This week in Ireland the Initiative held its first conference on the theme of "Women Redefining Peace: The Middle East and Beyond." It was held in closed session and was attended by over 70 women from around the globe, including human rights activists, disarmament experts and ex-political prisoners.

According to Nobel Laureate Jody Williams (USA, 1997), "arising from our deliberations in Ireland this week, we feel strongly mandated by some of the most prolific women peace activists to advocate at the highest level for greater roles for women in achieving peace and combating violence.

"Women are often the faceless and voiceless victims of conflict. Gender inequality is the root cause of this. Governments and those in positions of power are reluctant to face this down, and as a result, when women articulate their concerns and try to negotiate resolutions, they are mostly ignored.

"Over the coming weeks and months, the women Nobel Laureates will be making representations to Governments and global institutions to realize the important contribution that women can play in combating violence and securing peace."

During its first year, the Nobel Women's Initiative has been particularly concerned about the mounting challenges that face women in the Middle East, and in particular in Iran and Lebanon. In August, Nobel Laureate Dr. Shirin Ebadi (Iran, 2003) and her colleagues were threatened with prosecution for carrying out their human rights work. Furthermore, earlier this year, Iran Authorities blocked

access to the website of a landmark campaign – initiated by women – to collect one million signatures demanding an end to legal discrimination against women in Iranian law.

According to Williams, the hostilities and serious threats that are being experienced by women in Iran is just one demonstration of how women’s engagement in peace resolution is hampered. “We realize that events such as those in Iran are not isolated. Our ability to confront such actions against women requires us to engage with Governments and work as a strong global force with other women so that we can strengthen our response strategies.”

Addressing today’s event in Dublin, Ebadi said that she felt that despite the difficulties she and her colleagues faced in Iran, there was some reason to be optimistic. “From our deliberations at our conference this week, we feel that Iran and the wider Middle East can act as an important model for how women’s rights, human security and peace issues can be addressed globally. We are a live example of applying different approaches in dealing effectively with fundamentalism and securing rights for women. As our work continues in the Middle East, we can create models of best practice that can hopefully be applied by women in other global settings.

“Apart from creating best-practice approaches to conflict resolution, we are also cognizant of the fact that women are victims of violence, be it through rape, beatings or honor killings. A big part of the work that we now will undertake as Nobel Laureates is to highlight this violence and secure actions by Governments to protect women from such abuses.”

Today’s event was also addressed by Nobel Laureates Betty Williams and Mairead Corrigan Maguire (Ireland, 1976). According to Mairead Corrigan Maguire, “it is by no means insignificant that Ireland was selected as the location of the first international conference of the Nobel Women’s Initiative. For three decades, women in Northern Ireland have played a consistent and progressive role in securing a lasting settlement. Our work can hopefully act as an inspiration to other women who are living in conflict situations. The recent achievement of a devolved government in Northern Ireland is a demonstration that efforts can be rewarded. And while significant credit has gone to the main power-brokers in securing this devolution, the role which women in Northern Ireland played at all levels cannot be underestimated.”

OpenDemocracy.net covered the conference in a series of podcasts, blogs and articles by participants, which are being published on openDemocracy.net. Visit: <http://nobelwomensinitiative.opendemocracy.net/>

ENDS.

*“A different world is a system of governance that is just, respects human rights and represents the diversity of human beings. That’s when we have democracy. Sometimes because of misrepresentation of that word, people resist it. As we move forward, we need to look for a system that will give everyone a voice. We must give each other space and respect each other’s rights.*”

*“In 2004 the Norwegian Nobel committee recognized that it’s not possible to achieve peace unless we use our resources in a sustainable way – bearing in mind future generations. Security and peace will come if we find a link between equitable distribution of resources, sustainable resources and good governance.”*

—Wangari Maathai

# Nobel winners decry lack of women's rights in Middle East

By David McKittrick, Ireland Correspondent

Individually they are impressive; together they are formidable. Six Nobel Peace laureates from around the world - all women - gathered in Dublin yesterday to take part in a major conference on the issue of female empowerment and the advancement of peace in the Middle East.

The group, two of whom are Irish, represent six of the seven living female Nobel laureates. The seventh, Aung San Suu Kyi, remains imprisoned in Burma.

Describing the conference, one of the six, Professor Jody Williams, said: "We looked at the violence against women resulting from the war in Iraq, which has its roots in the oil industry's lust for the reserves in the Middle East and the resulting interests at stake."

Last year, the laureates established the Nobel Women's Initiative, which they described as a collective voice on issues of peace and women's rights. Its purpose is "to address and work to prevent the root causes of violence by spotlighting and promoting the efforts of women's rights activists, researchers and organisations working to advance peace, justice and equality".

Those attending the conference included 80 women's rights activists from 30 different countries, as well as ex-political prisoners, founders of international rights organisations, disarmament experts, journalists and emerging activists.

One of its stated aims was "deepening our understanding of how the private and public dynamics of violence against women, particularly in the Middle East, intersect and therefore how solutions must reflect a more integrated approach." The conference concluded that the root causes of violence were inequalities, including those of power, control of resources, racism, intolerance and the denial of rights for women. One of the laureates, Shirin Ebadi, noted: "It is our sadness that our sister laureate Aung San Suu Kyi has yet again had her detention extended. We look forward to a day when she can be amongst us." She added: "We discussed the role of the media in dismissing and sometimes trivialising the voices of women, saving our environment, equal access to resources of all types, equal access to justice, stopping the madness of the proliferation of weapons around the world that fuel the wars, killing us, our children and our husbands."

# Laureates head gender campaign

by **Brian Hutton**

SIX female Nobel peace laureates came together yesterday to fire the opening salvo in a global offensive on sexual discrimination.

The campaigners vowed to lobby governments and major institutions in a high-profile bid to root out gender inequality.

The strategy was unveiled in Dublin at the conclusion of the first international conference of the Nobel Women's Initiative — made up of six of the seven, surviving peace prize winners.

The six women — Dr Jody Williams, Shirin Ebadi, Wangari Maathai, Rigoberta Menchu Tum and Ireland's Betty Williams and Mairéad Corrigan Maguire — represent struggles in North and South America, Europe, the Middle East and Africa. The seventh woman, Aung San Suu Kyi, is still imprisoned in Burma.

Ms Corrigan Maguire was awarded the peace prize along with Ms Williams in 1976 for their work to end the conflict in Ireland.

“For three decades, women in Northern Ireland have played a consistent and progressive role in securing a lasting settlement.

“The recent achievement of a devolved government in Northern Ireland is a demonstration that efforts can be rewarded.”

Human rights activists, disarmament experts and ex-political prisoners from around the world attended the closed session conference this week which focused on the plight of women in the Middle East.

# Nobel women meet to build a world of peace, justice and equality

Six of the seven living female Nobel Peace laureates have been talking peace in Galway. One of them, **Jody Williams**, explains the issues

**F**or the past days, I've listened to women from 30 countries who have come together in Galway for the first international conference of the Nobel Women's Initiative (NWI). The initiative was launched in January 2006, bringing together six of the seven living women who have received the Nobel Peace Prize. Our sister Aung San Suu Kyi of Burma, of course, could not be with us because she continues to be imprisoned by the military dictatorship that clings to power there.

We have come together to leverage the prestige of the Nobel Prize to focus on violence against women in all forms and under all circumstances, and the many creative and powerful ways that women combat, prevent and survive it. In Galway, we have been sharing our experiences - from the household to the global level - to secure peace.

While focusing primarily on the violence in the Middle East, we are in Ireland because two of us - Mairead Corrigan Maguire and Betty Williams - are from Northern Ireland. We knew that all of us at this conference could be inspired and could learn lessons about building peace from the women of Northern Ireland who bring decades of experience in conflict resolution.

Perhaps, surprisingly to some, a common feeling of the women at our conference is that the word "peace" is somehow simplistic. It is a concern of the weak, the utopian dreamers who do not have a "real-

istic" understanding of our violent world. Every woman here - whether from Iran, Iraq, Palestine, Syria, Israel, the United States, Sudan, Mexico or Kosovo to name just a few of the countries represented - is a testament to the fact that building peace is hard work each and every day.

It is hard work because we recognise that peace is not the absence of armed conflict. The absence of armed violence is perhaps one element of peace. Real and sustainable peace can only be built alongside justice and equality.

The root causes of violence are inequalities - whether of power; of control of resources; of racism, intolerance and discrimination or of the denial of the rights of women around the world. Working to change these massive, global inequalities is our work in achieving "peace".

This week, we discussed what violence looks like from women's perspective. It looks like domestic violence: men beating their women and children, because they can. It is the use of rape as a weapon of war: soldiers raping women to humiliate, to destroy families and communities whether in Darfur or in Burma. It is "honour" killing: men murdering women to "protect" the "honour" of other men in their families. It is occupation. It is military invasion. If I were to continue to describe all the forms of violence against women, it would not fit on this page.

We looked at the violence

## THE IRISH TIMES - JUNE 1, 2007 [CONT'D]

against women resulting from the war in Iraq, which has its roots in the oil industry's lust for the reserves in the Middle East and the resulting interests at stake.

We discussed the role of the media in dismissing and sometimes trivialising the voices of women, as if the only thing we can talk about are "women's issues". As if women's issues are not humanity's issues - saving our environment, equal access to resources of all types, equal access to justice, stopping the madness of the proliferation of weapons around the world that fuel the wars, killing us, our children and our husbands. We looked at violence against women through the manipulation of culture in the name of religion for political gain, whether it be in the US, Ireland or the Middle East.

In concluding our conference, we recognised that we make up more than half of the population of the globe and we still are denied our rightful place with dignity and equality, in the home or in the halls of power. Women and their children suffer the most in war, and are often the creative initiators of peace. However, women are almost never given a place at the formal negotiating table to construct peace in their own communities when the wars come to an end.

The women who came together this week in Galway at the first conference of the Nobel Women's Initiative know that, regardless of our country of origin, we come from cultures of violence. Our collective goal is to build cultures of peace, one community at a time.

We recognise that violence is not just something that bubbles up in human beings. Violence is a choice. It is an individual choice and a choice of society to condemn it or accept it. We believe that we can learn to make different choices and in this increasingly small world, we must learn to make different choices.

When women are represented at all levels of power and when women's voices are taken seriously, we know that we will make different choices. Our conference marks just one step in our common work to build a world with justice and equality for us all.

*Jody Williams was the recipient of the 1997 Nobel Peace Prize. She served as the founding co-ordinator of the International Campaign to*



[L to R] Shirin Ershadi, Charlotte Bunch, Nancee Oku Bright, Brigid Inder and Jane Akwero Odwong during "International Strategies for Peace-building and Access to Justice."

# OPENDEMOCRACY CONFERENCE COVERAGE

*OpenDemocracy.net covered The Nobel Women's Initiative's First International Conference: "Women Redefining Peace in The Middle East & Beyond" in a series of podcasts, blogs and articles by participants, which have been published on openDemocracy.net. We have included the articles and excerpts from the blogs in this section. Please visit <http://nobelwomensinitiative.opendemocracy.net/> to read more and to listen to the podcasts.*

## THE MEANING OF PEACE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

by Shirin Ebadi

One of the important tasks of the 21st century is redefining social concepts. I would like to start redefining the word "peace." The main question here is whether peace means the absence of war. In other words, if a country is not involved in a war, do the people of that country live in a green peace? Definitely no. This definition of peace belongs to a few centuries ago. In the twenty first century peace has to be defined otherwise. For example the devastating situation of Aids patients in the world, specifically in African countries is more dangerous than guns and bullets.

Pursuant to a report of UNICEF, in the year 2006, the number of children under fourteen years of age who are suffering from Aids is 2.1 million. These children will lose their lives although their country is not involved in a war. In some fifty poor countries such as Chad, Guinea Bissau, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Afghanistan and Somalia, one of every six children dies before reaching the age of five. The cause of death is not having access to health care, vaccinations, clean drinkable water and malnutrition. These children do not lose their lives to bombs, they die of extreme poverty. This is why we need a new definition of peace. Peace means serenity. One can only feel serene if one's human rights are not violated and one's integrity is protected. Obviously a human being who does not have access to education due to extreme poverty, or who has been sentenced to imprisonment for expressing his/her opinion does not enjoy serenity and does not live in peace. The same is true about a person who has lost his/her home and lives on the streets. Peace can only be permanent if it is based on two principles - democracy and social justice.

In authoritarian societies, whether religious or political, where votes of people don't count, where any opposition voice is silenced with bullets and imprisonment, peace cannot be permanent. The other principle of peace is social justice. Peace cannot be established in a society where a big class distinction exists. We can only be happy if our neighbours are not suffering from hunger. How can we hope to establish worldwide peace when 75% of the wealth of the world is in the hands of 1% of the population of the world? Pursuant to a report of the International Labour Organisation published in 2004, one hundred and 26 million of the children of the world are engaged in performing dangerous work. Social justice should be regarded not only at the international, but also, at national levels.

History proves that a society where a big gap exists between the rich and the poor will not be peaceful. In America, the total wealth of one per cent of the population equals the total wealth of the remaining 65%. In a country like India, millions of people are born homeless. They get married on the streets, live on the streets and die on the streets, whereas the most expensive and luxurious hotels and homes exist for only five per cent of the population.

Democracy should be redefined too. In its classical meaning, democracy means the government of the majority. But a majority who wins in free elections does not have the right to govern as it wishes. Let's not forget that most dictatorships in the world have been elected democratically, meaning by the majority of the vote of the people. Like Hitler. Therefore, winning elections does not guarantee democracy. The majority that gains power through free elections should observe the framework of democracy. Now what is the framework of democracy?

The framework of democracy is human rights law. In other words, the majority who has won power can only perform within the framework of the laws of human rights and cannot violate such laws. No majority in power can use religion as an excuse to oppress half of the population of society, in other words women. The oppression that women in Iran are suffering at the present is an example of such an excuse. No majority in power should have the right to prevent freedom of speech with the excuse of ideology. Like what has happened in Cuba and China. No majority in power should have the right to limit political freedom, like the United States of America that does not permit the activity of communist parties and limits their work, open or in secret.

In light of the above, governments do not gain their legitimacy through votes of people and voting boxes. They gain their legitimacy through votes of people and respect for human rights. Excuses for violation of human rights such as cultural relativism, religion and ideology are not acceptable. Human rights have been derived from religions and civilisations and can be applied to any civilisation and culture.

Available at [http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-fifty/meaning\\_century\\_4670.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-fifty/meaning_century_4670.jsp)

*Peace-building is patient, exacting, unglamorous, long-term work, whose foot soldiers are often women – the opposite of the shock and awe of modern war. Isabel Hilton reflects on how the hard road to peace offers lessons for democracy too.*

## PEACEWORK: LESSONS WE HAVE FAILED TO LEARN

by Isabel Hilton

So much of what we understand depends on who tells the story. The story, for instance, of the fall of communism in central and eastern Europe in 1989 was most often told as a victory for Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher's politics of confrontation, a victory of implacable opposition, superior technology and a readiness to confront the "evil empire" with all weapons at "our" disposal. The language used talked of getting tough, preparing for war, facing them down, us against them. Those who advanced another discourse were called naïve, fellow-traveling or "useful idiots."

Looking back, it is curious what traction this version gained, given that every journalist, every participant and every witness to the televised proceedings of the European revolutions of 1989 was perfectly clear in what he or she saw: that ordinary people, having lost their fear, took to the streets in huge numbers and faced down oppressive regimes in country after country.

But when the instant histories came to be written, how much weight was given to the long process of engagement, through the Helsinki process, that had made these movements possible: the meetings, the encounters, the friendships and the civic solidarities, often pursued on the Western side by organizations that were themselves in opposition to the militaristic tone of their own governments, and which were marginalized at home even as they forged profoundly effective links abroad? 1989 was not the triumph of one militarism over another, but a victory of peace over war, of people who quietly and with determination exercised their collective power.

In Northern Ireland, too, where on May 9, 2007, the power-sharing government at last began its business of governing – secure enough as an idea and an institution to be mocked in a satirical puppet-show on television – there is a missing dimension to the narrative of the transition from war to peaceful politics. One box universally ticked in the report card of Tony Blair's government as he waves his interminable goodbyes is that of "bringing peace" to Northern Ireland. While Blair's commitment and enthusiasm to ending the thirty-year "troubles" in this contested land was manifest, there is also a case to be made that Ireland, with a lot of help from its friends, finally brought peace to itself.

It was a small group of women in Northern Ireland, who, in 1976, before Tony Blair was elected to parliament, stood up and said no to violence and insisted that there was another way. They worked doggedly, day in day out, to bring together men who could not abide to be in the same part of town, let alone the same room. They did this for years, from territory that lay well outside the evident power of the gun or the government, through moments of hope and disappointment, finally leveraging themselves to the negotiating table, insisting on a voice. Some of them won the Nobel Peace Prize, an honor they recognize is shared with the many who stood with them. "Peace-building," as one of them said, "is very hard work."

### **The first step**

There is a terrible sameness about victims' stories. No matter how many different ways are there for people to go hungry or grieve, to be injured or killed, we know the outcome and grow tired. The pain of petty cruelty is almost easier to imagine: the grandmother who cannot attend her granddaughter's wedding because she lives on the wrong side of an uncrossable line; the grandfather who will not attend the baptism of his grandchildren because it takes place in a church he refuses to enter; the mother who waited forty days for the body of her son, dead on his daily journey to medical school; a mother trying to give hope to a child whose family home has been bulldozed; a father humiliated in front of his child at a checkpoint he had to cross to earn a miserable daily wage. Those who wish to rekindle our indignation send actors to stand on the film-set of other people's tragedies, in the hope that celebrity will shine a light on something we have wearied of looking at. Those who do not live conflict on a daily basis, who have the luxury of alternatives, grow hopeless or indignant by proxy. We allow wars that we know to be pointless to roll on, ashamed of the ineffectiveness of our own frustration.

Hope seems too complicated to engage us for long, and yet, it does depend who tells the story. In Ireland, for a few days, the story was told of people who had learned to speak across lines of hatred and discover a common humanity on the other side, who had learned to abandon dreams of victory tomorrow and to talk of life today, who were prepared to deal with the devil himself if there was a chance that it might work.

Some had begun when they had nothing more to lose in war, having already lost everything that was most precious. But for others the starting-point was the realization that there was nothing worth winning that could be won by violence, whatever their governments told them. From there they understood that governments are our servants, not our masters and that there is no such thing as national security if it fails to bring security to every citizen. To understand that is to take the first step to redefining peace, and to begin the long, hard task of building it.

Available at [http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-fifty/war\\_peace\\_women\\_4664.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-fifty/war_peace_women_4664.jsp)

*Women's peace-building in Northern Ireland played a crucial part in weaning a divided society from violence. Anne Carr shares her own 30-year campaign.*

## A NORTHERN IRELAND LESSON

by Anne Carr

I have just returned from the first conference organized by the Nobel Women's Initiative where strong and brave women's-rights activists from around the world – Afghanistan to Somalia, Burma to Uganda – shared their stories and work. Amid violence and mayhem, these women are creating amazing networks and capacities to help repair and rebuild their societies. The experience has led me to reflect on my own long journey as a peace-builder in Northern Ireland, which I hope could be a source of optimism to sisters in these and other lands devastated by seemingly intractable conflict.

On May 8, 2007, our Northern Ireland devolved assembly met, inclusive of all our elected representatives, from the Democratic Unionist Party to Sinn Féin, to inaugurate a new political era. The 108 assembly members elected on March 8 sat down together, agreeing to share power and to work together for the good of all our people.

And I for one had to pinch myself to see if I was really witnessing this with my own eyes.

This was because what I was witnessing was not begrudging, dismissive, demonizing behavior and body language from previous arch-enemies in the staunch Unionist and Republican camps, but eye contact, smiles, laughter and good-humored banter. For me the for-so-long-impossible had happened – and tears trickled down my cheeks.

After the death of over 3,600 people and injuries to tens of thousands more, after all the pain and all the false dawns – something new and special was emerging. A seemingly unsolvable centuries-old conflict in Ireland was coming to an end and an acknowledgment that whatever our different and just aspirations, politics rather than violence was the way forward and compromises had to be made. Even the reporters present admitted that this “good news story” left them almost unable to believe their eyes.

### **A long road**

I have been involved in peace-building work in Northern Ireland for a very long time.

As a Protestant teenager in Belfast in the early 1970s I dared to cross the religious divide and marry a Catholic. We witnessed at first hand the devastating violence and fear as the new era of instability emerged following the civil-rights marches of the 1960s. We had heard the guns, witnessed the bombs and saw our friends having to leave their homes and move to the “other side” through fear and intimidation. But it was only when the first of my four children was born that I started to actively work to end the violence and join with others to attempt to build a society based on love and trust.

Along with a few other parents I worked to develop the first “integrated” primary school for Protestant and Catholic children, outside the Belfast area. We had seen the success of Lagan College in Belfast and wanted our children to be educated together in an ethos of harmony and mutual understanding in Newcastle, Co. Down where I then lived. We started with nothing and had to raise the funds to start the school and run it for over two school years before the government took over responsibility for funding. A wonderful primary school, All Children's – now oversubscribed with an enrolment of over 200 children – was born.

I then called the first meeting to establish a second-level college in the area so that children could continue their education together into their teenage years. Shimna College, Newcastle was the result; it has become a successful integrated secondary school teaching children from 11-18 years old, which has been awarded special status for its excellence in languages. These are parent-driven, parent-supported initiatives which have made such a difference to our children's ability to mix on a daily basis. In 1990 I joined the Women Together organization and spent the next eleven years of my life actively campaigning with women from across Northern Ireland to end the violence. We organized vigils and rallies on a regular basis, always seeing the immediate aim of halting the violence as only a starting-point of the long and difficult process of rebuilding relationships, supporting those who had lost loved ones and moving on.

It was a hard road with moments both joyful (the paramilitary ceasefires of 1994) and tragic (the breaking of the IRA ceasefire of August 1994 with the bomb at Canary Wharf, London, in February 1996). When the latter happened, we immediately called our supporters together and held a vigil outside Belfast city hall. 5,000 people gathered at very short notice – all sending a message to the world that violence was not the answer and that the painstaking process of dialogue and building relationships across the divides was the only way forward.

The re-establishment of the IRA ceasefire in July 1997 gave momentum to the peace-talks process. The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition was founded to ensure that women were at the heart of the process. I played my part and eventually stood for election to local government, winning a seat on Down district council from 1997-2001. The Women's Coalition was crucial in the development of the peace process that led to the historic Good Friday agreement of April 1998: its abiding principles of inclusion, equality and human rights brought a fresh and practical agenda and language that helped to seed a hard-won transition from conflict.

## The work of dialogue

At the heart of all my years of peace-building work has been a commitment to the importance of dialogue among conflict. The years of violence, death and destruction in Northern Ireland caused untold pain and grief and left communities very divided, with up to 90% of our people living apart and often never getting an opportunity to get to know someone from the "other" side.

For years I have worked, wherever and whenever possible, to bring people together to share with one another their hopes, aspirations and fears and to challenge stereotypes and assumptions, which only direct face-to-face contact can do. I helped establish an organization called Community Dialogue in 1997, to give ordinary people on the ground an opportunity to meet and talk about sorting out their difficulties and building a new future. We felt that dialogue between ordinary people was as important as that between politicians.

These conversations on highly contentious issues often involve people from difficult areas, sometimes in a quiet rural location and sometimes in the midst of divided estates or schools. They are vital, difficult and important meetings. They are not about reaching agreement, but about providing opportunities in as safe a space as possible to share our deepest thoughts, feelings, hopes and fears on any controversial topic - to create understanding and to help people to make informed choices about their future.

I believe that honest dialogue, no matter how difficult, is the cement that holds societies together. By hearing one another we create new possibilities. We share, we learn, we realize that the creation of a shared society, where we can all belong, is possible. Our dialogues always focus on three basic questions - on any issue which divides us:

- » What do you want?
- » What do you need?  
(and, ultimately, considering that others in our society have very different aspirations)
- » What can you live with?

That momentous day, May 8, 2007, was also the culmination of this approach to peace-building - a day when all our politicians agreed to sit together in government and work out a way forward which acknowledges our differing aspirations, creeds, cultures and politics and creates the basis on which a truly shared future can begin.

This realization that politics and not violence is the only way forward was a long time coming - but it had to come. There comes a time when people lose their fear and things are never the same again. That is the moment when the foundations of a brighter future have been secured - and the real work can begin.

Available at [http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-fifty/ireland\\_lesson\\_4673.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-fifty/ireland_lesson_4673.jsp)



[L to R] Wangari Maathai, Anne Carr, Ann Patterson, Shirin Ebadi, Mairead Corrigan Maguire, Bronagh Hinds, Betty Williams and Jody Williams.

*Nadwa Sarandah's family has experienced the Palestinian national tragedy in microcosm. She explains why it led her to look outwards and across the divides of history.*

## NOTHING IS IMPOSSIBLE, THE DIFFICULT TAKES LONGER

**by Nadwa Sarandah**

In 1999, my sister Naela was killed in the streets of Jerusalem. Naela was a public-health consultant who dedicated her career to the rights to life and justice. But her death, as much as it devastated and distressed me, opened a tiny window of hope.

Joining the Parents' Circle Families Forum, a group of Israelis and Palestinians who have lost loved ones but who still seek reconciliation based on mutual respect and understanding, I have come to realize, and for the first time in my life, that Israelis have never looked Palestinians in the eye, have never considered them as equals and never understood their suffering simply because the Palestinians did nothing to change this. Each party lived in total denial of the other's existence, never interacting as equal human beings, each believing they were the victim in one way or the other.

Understanding, not necessarily accepting each other's historical narratives, can bring about acceptance of one another as equals, and as partners in the search for the peaceful solution that we all claim the desire to achieve. This can only come about through dialogue - and dialogue with an open heart and mind, not a dialogue of the deaf. I've also come to realize that politicians are not going to bring about the change desired and needed: only the people can.

Albert Einstein rightfully said: "We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them."

### **Palestine and loss**

The background to my experience is that the partition of Palestine created a humanitarian, judicial and democratic crisis by which both Palestinians and Israelis became victims and are paying a heavy price. There is no justice in a resolution that divides a country for the sake of creating another. The world community accepted the Zionist argument of the necessity to create a Jewish state in Palestine, thus creating hatred and animosity for Jews in the Arab countries in general and amongst Palestinians in particular.

What was the world thinking when they expected the Palestinians to agree to such a partition? Accepting the partition of your country is far from normal. By the way, neither party accepted the partition at the time, for different reasons. A humanitarian crisis arose also due to the expulsion of most Palestinians from what was now called Israel. A political conflict was also created.

The world community at the United Nations partitioned my country and has watched my people suffer ever since.

In 1967, when Palestinians were unarmed and under Jordanian and Egyptian rule, a war broke out and what was left of Palestine was occupied. Israel took the opportunity to expand its borders and part-fulfill the dream of some Israelis for a "greater Israel" - at the expense of morality, humanity and democracy.

No international law or UN resolution has been able to end this horrific occupation. All this historical background left me with an occupation that took away my humanity, my dignity and - last but not least - my freedom. It led to the dispersion of my immediate family members. My sister lost her birthright because she was not in the country in June 1967. My brother lost his because he committed a crime of falling in love with an American and marrying her; his family will never be able to choose to live in Jerusalem.

As a child, I was always wondering whether I was the victim or the offender. I watched Israelis developing their country in a democracy for Jews while I was waiting for justice to take its course. It is a just cause, and a straightforward case, isn't it? Why isn't anybody doing anything? What is wrong with the world?

As an adult, I realized that both justice and my interest as a Palestinian might not coincide with the interest of other countries, and that there is no absolute justice in the world - and even if there is, it is not served in restaurants on silver platters. I've also realized that the stronger you are, the more you can get away with. I hated what I've come to understand.

What I witnessed too was that the policies of consecutive Israeli governments were creating "facts on the ground" in the occupied territories to make the creation of Palestine both an impossible dream and an unrealistic one. Any sincere intention to find a peaceful solution based on international law and UN resolution was absent. The rest of the world dealt disgracefully with the issue, employing double-standards to bypass the issue and accept misinformation in order to avoid exerting any pressure on Israel.

### **The change from within**

This larger weight of concern meant that I long lived in conflict, leading up to that day in 1999 when I lost my beloved sister. If there had been no occupation, and no hatred between Jews and Palestinians, my sister would not have died and I would not have lost her

forever. Life would not have been so unbearable and undesirable at times. For years, I couldn't function. I was stuck in my grief, my anger, my hate. Does inflicting pain to others help? My answer was no. I couldn't live with the guilty feeling of hurting somebody. Revenge is not the answer, not for me at least.

I'd rather be killed than be a killer. All I want is very simple. I want to be recognized as a human being, as a Palestinian and free in my own country. To my surprise the solution came from an Israeli whose son was killed, and who was not seeking revenge but dialogue. This man's apology opened my mind and led to dialogue that led to understanding. When one recognizes his or her mistake, the other can forgive – not in the sense of turning the other cheek, not in the sense of giving up your right to justice, but in the sense of “yes, we can live together as equals, with equal rights and equal opportunities for all.” That is what democracy is all about, isn't it?

Peace and security does not come about by favoring one against the other, by enforcing a solution suitable to one and not the other, by a strong army or the construction of walls, by seeking to quell the hunger for freedom. It comes through dialogue, understanding and building trust between human beings who respect each other. That is possible, I've done it and I've experienced the change from within.

Available at [http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy\\_power/50.50/nothing\\_impossible\\_difficult\\_longer](http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy_power/50.50/nothing_impossible_difficult_longer)



Robi Damelin, of Israel, and Nadwa Sarandah, of Palestine, are members of the Parents' Circle Families Forum, an organization of over 500 bereaved Israeli and Palestinian families who have all lost relatives to the violence in the Middle East.

# REFLECTIONS ON THE NWI CONFERENCE

by Maggie Baxter

I came to the conference as a trustee of Green Belt Movement International whose founding director received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004 – Wangari Maathai. Having been the Executive Director of WOMANKIND Worldwide, a UK international women's rights and development agency, and now working on stopping the trafficking of women into the UK, developing a women's resource and fund in the UK and supporting a small agency called Women for Refugee Women, the opportunity of attending the conference was an opportunity to listen and reflect. To listen to women who were tackling the complexities of peace-building both as academics and practitioners, to test my knowledge and assumptions on women's rights around the world, and begin to see where and how my experience could be used in the future.

I was particularly interested in hearing how outside agencies, whether individuals or organizations, could assist in other people's crises. After all I had spent nearly 20 years working for funding organizations. What was appropriate? What was legitimate? What was asked for?

It would also throw light on how the women Nobel Laureates could collectively bring their influence to bear in changing things on the ground for communities suffering as a result of conflict. Conflicts which were often not of their making and deeply rooted in a number of conflicting arenas: global power-mongering; corporate supremacy; the market economy; international and national government policies – and the victims of most conflicts being women and children.

## Day 1 –

The day was one of setting the scene with insights of the role the USA played on the world stage both politically and economically and how their instability and fear had set the world on a possible path to a third world war. By the end of the day my head was spinning from the many concepts that had been thrown out and chewed over: fundamentalism; identity politics; power mapping; the “weaponization of women's bodies,” capitalism and market economy and many more.

But what of the role of outsiders to the situations? It was mentioned that we need to think of what kind of interventions were appropriate for donor agencies, governments, civil society activists acknowledging that support and resources are needed – but support needs to be sure that it is not doing more damage or harm than the help it brings.

The messages: be careful who you partner with, there may be conflicting agendas; through these partners continue to make the connections and linkages and a collective movement and strength can be achieved; always use the media with individual powerful stories – each story should add strength to the other.

But beware! International not for profits are feeding on women in areas of conflict – they take a third of the budget back to their own countries, they don't listen to local voices who know what needs doing, they are arrogant thinking they know better. This message came across loud and clear on the second day...

## Day 2 -

The power of the Northern Ireland experience was profound and made more so when hearing the traumatic stories of women who had lost their immediate families in Israel and Palestine. The positive energy Ann and Bronagh brought to the conference was palpable and their messages clear: “violence does not work,” “there could never be a winner,” “dialogue is crucial,” “keep hope alive,” “it is all about inclusion, human rights and equality,” “peace-building is hard hard work.” Hopefully their experience will have an impact on the Middle East – it would seem they are about ten years behind Northern Ireland in the negotiations. Their experience can and should help all conflicts around the world and resources must be made available for this to happen.

So here is something outsiders can bring – resources to make sure experience is shared. However frustration with external intervention was expressed in an outburst of “Get out of the way, stop gate keeping, listen more productively.” So having felt momentarily that there was a positive contribution an outsider could bring I was back in my box! Also we had heard quite rightly that outsiders should be encouraged to “study the culture of the countries before intervening, use national expertise at all times – they know the issues and the solutions.” However it was stated that nationals working for international agencies are always treated as a “lower” person and never with the same degree of knowledge and respect as those who think they know better based outside the country. I wish international agencies would hear this.

### **Day 3-**

It wasn't until I reached the airport at 8.30 p.m. thinking of my three day old friends settling in to celebrate the conference, sadly missing Wangari's promised Irish jigs, that the full impact of the three days hit me. The face of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi came to mind. I read the pamphlet entitled "Still licensed to rape" highlighting the systematic rape of women - the youngest being only 8 years old - by the military as a strategy to subjugate the peoples of Shan State in Burma. The same stories, slightly different, had come from Northern Uganda, from Darfur, from Kosovo, Iraq, Palestine and Afghanistan. Stories of rape used as a weapon of war, so called "honor killings" to save the reputations of families, the denial of access to information and justice - the many forms of violence against women flooded back. Violence against women does not only occur within conflict situations, it's all pervasive trafficking of women into the sex industry, female genital mutilation, early and forced marriage, domestic violence - the list seems endless.

So sitting waiting to be called at Shannon Airport to leave for London Heathrow, I resolved to continue the struggle to get resources to women and women's organizations so strategies and experiences can be shared - tomorrow I chair a meeting to push forward a women's resource agency and fund in the UK to support women there and around the world. Do I have a choice? In the words of Ghandhi one has to "be the change you want to be."

Thank you Nobel Women's Initiative for the time in Galway; it was inspirational.

Available at <http://nobelwomensinitiative.opendemocracy.net/2007/06/01/reflections-on-the-nwi-conference-by-maggie-baxter/>

*“Real peace – sustainable peace – can only be built alongside justice and equality.”*



# EXCERPTS FROM OPENDEMOCRACY'S BLOG DIARIES

*The NWI openDemocracy blog was a diary of the event written by four rapporteurs, Roja Bandari, Rebecca Barlow, Jameen Kaur and Amelia Korangy, and openDemocracy's program director Jane Gabriel. We have provided selected blog entries here but you can read full versions at <http://nobelwomensinitiative.opendemocracy.net>.*

## PRE-CONFERENCE

**Amelia Korangy...** Working for peace, justice, and equality is not an easy task – anyone familiar with the history of conflict and post conflict societies knows well that progress is often slow and heartache always quite poignant. Nevertheless, this year's first international conference carries with it an air of security and hope for the future of these many organizations around the globe that are focused on aiding women and girls, changing inequitable policy, and strengthening the path towards peace.

In a world where media attention increasingly seems to confer legitimacy, where funding surfaces as one of the most critical challenges for those seeking peace, justice, and equality, and where the best resources day in and day out are seeded in our fellow community of activists – it is remarkable that the Nobel Women's Initiative uses this conference to establish the beginnings of a more unified, globally recognized, mutually supportive, and financially stable independent sector led by women committed to nothing short of changing the world.

**Jameen Kaur...** I have a magnitude of thoughts: I think the conference will represent a fantastic and much needed opportunity for women from around the globe to learn the reality of what is happening at various levels. I hope to understand and focus on what works where and why, what hasn't worked, the gaps that need to be addressed, and the bridges which need to be built to address these gaps.

**Roja Bandari...** I am hoping to bring a few things of my own to the conference. I feel that I have the passion and maybe a good intuition about women's rights and especially women's condition in my home country, Iran. I have spent the past five or six months obsessively reading about a campaign called the “**One Million Signatures**” campaign. Everything about this campaign intrigues me, from their face-to-face method that emphasizes education and dialogue to their non-hierarchical structure where activists collaborate without the restrictions of a hierarchy. I was impressed by the amazing writings of my sisters in Iran where you can sense their wisdom and courage radiating from every single line you read.

**Rebecca Barlow...** For me, the opportunity to engage with and learn from the real experiences and practical knowledge of the Nobel Laureates and their colleagues as they have struggled for peace, justice, and human rights is both exciting and humbling. History shows that women have a unique and innovative approach to conflict resolution and peace. In this sense I look forward to the conference and its outcomes with a real sense of hope.

## DAY 1

**Jane Gabriel...** I'm struck by the completely relaxed way the five Laureates wander around the hotel with us all – sharing breakfast tables, smoking breaks, chatting with everyone as they go. This is direct, informal contact, anyone can and does talk to anyone. With 80 women activists here from thirty different countries and the chance to talk openly informally and honestly with the Laureates for three days, this is an extraordinary gathering. We're all going to be in one room, seated at about ten round tables, with the Laureates amongst us. It feels like we may be seeing a new way of exercising power.

**Jameen Kaur...** Unlike many other conferences, this one opened with unexpected hugs from delegates from all around the world. Behind smiles, colorful outfits and vibrant languages were stories from the women's human rights struggle from around the world. As a woman in my early thirties, I sit amongst women, humbled, intoxicated and energized by their decades of expertise and experience. I search for answers on their faces, what drives these women and the women they represent? The stories clearly illustrate that the “personal is political” and “the political personal.”

**Rebecca Barlow...**The diversity of voices in the room was nothing short of astounding, reflected only very partially in the channels on our foreign-language headsets.

**Amelia Korangy...**I was seated beside a Russian and an Israeli. We shared the table with Palestinian and Syrian activists, amongst Shirin Ebadi, Jody Williams, Wangari Maathai, and Betty Williams. In this room, we sat *together*, in solidarity, pain, and often awe of what we were hearing. Together we struggled to internalize many of the horrors that were being depicted. Each of us had different reactions to what was being said; each of us had different opinions to articulate, and each of us saw the world through a unique prism. Still, we listened and we looked together.

**Rebecca Barlow...**The focus of the discussions consistently moved towards strategizing for policy-oriented action, women's agency, and appropriation of power in various institutions. Personally, it is this aspect of the conference that I find to be most inspiring, and highly motivating. The conference at large represents a move beyond analysis alone towards dealing practically with human rights abuses and violence against women on the ground.

**Jameen Kaur...**The sole aim is to improve the lives of millions of women from around the world.

**Jane Gabriel...**In discussing types of violence the topics range from the need to contest the construction of our collective identity as women, and to refuse to make the false dichotomous choice the fundamentalists impose of being either "for or against us," to the fact that all societies have to explain three things - birth, death and the existence of at least two sexes - and therefore the construction of identity means that we have to address gender.

**Jameen Kaur...**Delegates were in absolute horror as the Bush administration's strategy was laid out bare. As [Iraqi participant] Yanar Mohammed stated, "You state oil is cheap, I tell you it is hugely expensive. I tell you I queue for hours, to be told to come back tomorrow. My room is cold, my children are cold. Or if I want oil, I must provide one of the soldiers a favor."

**Roja Bandari...**As an Iranian-American, I work to help my sisters in Iran while living in the US where my own life is affected by women's image and position in the society. When I came to the US at the age of 20, I was accustomed to the Iranian society with its own forms of male and female stereotyping and a different (and more visible) version of patriarchy. I had gotten used to ignore or maneuver around most of these issues. Americans have a different set of stereotypes...especially negative language associated with women which insulted me all anew when I started integrating into American society. I believe that the average American woman has to learn to feel solidarity with her sisters inside America in order to learn to also have solidarity with the rest of the women in the world.

**Amelia Korangy...**As the first day of the conference winds down to its end, I must say I am exhausted. It is challenging to listen to women give first hand accounts of the consequences that colonization, globalization, false imprisonment, human trafficking, rape, domestic violence, occupation, forced veiling, corrupt legal systems, and war have on the lives and communities of women. Still, despite the challenging realities, the information shared today from diverse regions of the world is not only important to those working for women's rights, but has also provided the necessary foundation of current realities that will serve as an impetus, a catalyst, and a springboard for the first International Conference of the Nobel Women's Initiative to move forward.

As I sit here now exhausted, emotionally drained and with an aching heart I am surprised at how excited I am for tomorrow. In fact, I am astonished at how hopeful I am right now. I am astonished at how, after 8 long hours of detailing the pain and abuse faced by women, I am able to smile. But smiling I am because if there is ever a place, ever a group of women, ever a coalition to be built that will challenge the violence, rape, genocide, and poverty suffered by women around the world it is here and now with the Nobel Women's Initiative's Conference.

## DAY 2

**Jameen Kaur...** Today we danced. We moved our bodies to the banana song sang by Nani from Indonesia. However my heart feels sore as I write. The peace process causes me pain. The peace process requires a deep inner strength, which sadly governments do not initiate. I saw the real face of conflict today and the emptiness it leaves behind. We heard stories from Northern Ireland, the pain and suffering of conflict to the peace it has now set. People move on, but they do not, cannot forget. "Peace is hard work, we suffer, emotions suffer, families suffer... yet we do it for our children, our grand children..." said Anne Carr. There can be no long term peace without the women.

**Jane Gabriel...** Anne Carr and Bronagh Hinds talked us through the determination and the imagination it took; the painstaking, careful, detailed, dangerous work that the women of Northern Ireland have undertaken since 1976 in the name of peace. When they said that "there comes a time when you lose your fear and things are never quite the same again," it captured the spirit of the story they told.

**Rebecca Barlow...** This afternoon's panel focused on Israel and the Occupied Territories. One theme resounded in this respect: there is no military-oriented solution to the problem of Israel-Palestine. What I have realized here today is that while we study conflict and the history of conflict, we must maintain a commitment to study and focus predominantly on peace and strategies for peace. Otherwise, what really is the point?

**Roja Bandari...** The stories of Robi Damelin and Nadwa Sarandah from the Parents' Circle Bereaved Families Forum, who had all lost someone dear to them but were taking steps toward peace, made me cry but also showed me how we should never simplify the issue and take out the human factor.

**Jameen Kaur...** We learnt that true compassion is about knowing your own darkness well enough to sit in darkness with others. It is a relationship of equals.

**Amelia Korangy...** For so many women around the globe...happiness is marginal. Instead, their lives are about survival. If my life is not about survival, it must be about contribution. Once we have broken down the stereotypes, the judgments, and the socially constructed barriers that exist...there should be no hesitation to act. Those who stand quiet...who make general assumptions of situations, who make superficial investments that fail to consider the local culture and the international context of change are those who have not yet been able to understand that we are people.

**Jameen Kaur...** All the stories and the real experience of woman on the ground...resoundingly stress that it is not that women are voiceless, that they do not cry and shout at the violence that is being inflicted on them, but more tragically that the world is earless. It is our biggest task and challenge to create ears for the ear less. It begins by owning our own story. And then deciding how we will use it.

**Amelia Korangy...** Tomorrow we will define, organize, collaborate, and expand our actions so that people will listen. Testimonies today prove that it is women and girls that need your ears the most. Listen.

## DAY 3

**Rebecca Barlow...** There are two aspects of the conference that stand out in my mind at this point. One is the incredible Iranian delegation led by Shirin Ebadi. These women – journalists, lawyers, activists – demonstrate such assertiveness, dynamism, intelligence and good humor so as to categorically negate stereotypes that may exist around them, particularly in popular Western press. The second aspect of the conference I would highlight is the democratic nature of the entire event. Rarely did an event take place, or particular topic be broached, without the consent of all participants at the conference...rarely was a voice not heard...The debates and discussions that ensued as a result were rich, lively, balanced, and never left without a logical conclusion. For me, this simply reinforced the fact that women must be further integrated into local, national, regional, and international decision-making structures and levels of governance. I do not approach my work from a feminist framework per se, but rather from a human rights and social justice basis. Having said this, I feel that there is no way the conference would have been as qualitatively good had it not been facilitated and moderated by women only.

**Jameen Kaur...** Many hands were going up for comments and questions; a sense of urgency had taken over – that what had been so vibrantly and passionately discussed did not remain merely in the room, but effectively infiltrated through every level of society. Each statement was again re-enhanced by a woman's human story of suffering. That at the core of all our discussions, our work was an overwhelming unity of pain and resistance which was endured every minute of every hour of every day by women worldwide. We were reminded again by Mairead Corrigan Maguire that we must all "live in the minute. That we must continue to celebrate life."

**Jane Gabriel...** I've heard how in coalition-building and inclusivity, the principles and not the ideology are the key. That dialogue works, but only when there is equality in the dialogue. That in order to transform victimization the term itself must be used as a tool – a political tool for consciousness raising – and not abused. That we must humanize not demonize each other in order to transform the culture of violence. That peace-building is long hard painful work, that *women can and do make a difference*. Northern Ireland is the proof.

So, how did this conference end? It ended with women from around the world who will not give in to the violence, singing, drinking and dancing long into the night – Iranian music, Spanish music, Irish music, the Beatles – we sang, danced, clapped and laughed – with Mairead Corrigan Maguire and Shirin Ebadi there all the way.

**Roja Bandari...** I have had a chance to watch a movie with Shirin Ebadi, have dinner at the same table with Mairead Maguire, sing the "peel banana" song with Betty Williams, envy Wangari Maathai's outfit, plan for an NPR interview with Jody Williams and sing, dance and learn from women many of which deserve to be laureates. Do you think I will ever wish to meet a president or celebrity in my life?

**Jameen Kaur...** As I walk away from the hotel, from the laughter and the electric vibrancy of 80 beautiful, strong women dancing and celebrating the essence and joy of life, I feel like a child that has just returned from a magical fun fair. I carry a huge bouquet of balloons in my hand, each one representing all the emotions I felt over the last three days, from anger to horror to joy and pain. I have been privileged to hear so much, see so much and be touched by so much. And I know within me that a window has opened in my heart, and I will never be the same. I know that I have a voice...and my voice with the voice of so many other men, women and children around the world will continue to fight for real change. I am reminded of what Suu Kyi said. That "freedom is giving joy to others. Freedom is understanding what is right within you, and exposing it without endangering yourself and others."