



CONCLUSIONS

CONCLUSIONS FROM “THE NOBEL WOMEN’S INITIATIVE’S FIRST INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE: WOMEN REDEFINING PEACE IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND BEYOND,” BY JODY WILLIAMS

“Peace and security does not come about by favouring 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.”
—Nadwa Sarandah

To understand this, as one conference participant put it, “is to take the first step to redefining peace and to begin the long, hard task of building it.” “The Nobel Women’s Initiative’s First International Conference: Women Redefining Peace in the Middle East and Beyond” took place in Galway, Ireland, from May 29–31, 2007, and brought together more than 80 of the world’s leading activists and researchers – including ex-political prisoners, human rights and disarmament experts, award-winning journalists and the most promising emerging activists – to offer their perspectives on issues ranging from gender inequality and women’s human rights to disarmament to questions about what really defines peace and security for us in today’s world. While the event focused on the violence in the Middle East, we were in Ireland because two of us are from Northern Ireland – Betty Williams and Mairead Corrigan Maguire – and we knew that all of us at the conference could be inspired and learn lessons about the “long, hard task” of building peace from the stories of women from Northern Ireland, who brought decades of experience on women’s activism and conflict resolution.

Our meeting brought together women from more than thirty countries to exchange experiences, compare successful strategies in countering violence against women and in promoting women’s human rights, and discuss how to work together to demand a central place for women during peace negotiations as well as after in their implementation. The Middle East was chosen as the focal point because of the conflicts, lack of democracy and political repression in the region – especially regarding women’s rights.

At the conference we talked a lot about the continuum of violence and that to effectively address it we must respond to violence on the local, national and regional as well as international levels. We came to understand that our work on women’s rights, religious fundamentalisms, nuclear weapons, government reform, corporate and media responsibility, and so on, is linked, whether we acknowledge the linkages or not, and that all of our work is contributing to building cultures of peace.

Perhaps surprisingly to some, a common feeling in Galway was that the word “peace” is a simplistic word that has come to be synonymous with the weak – with the utopian dreamers who do not have a “realistic” understanding of our violent world. Every woman at the conference – whether from Iran, Iraq, Palestine, Syria, Israel, the United States, Sudan, Mexico or Kosovo, to name just a few of the countries represented in Galway – was a testament to the fact that building peace is hard work undertaken each and every day.

It is hard work because we recognize that peace is not simply the absence of armed conflict, although the absence of armed violence is perhaps one element of peace. Real peace – sustainable peace – can only be built alongside justice and equality. The root causes of armed 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 – that is the work of “peace.”

Building peace can only be based on people-centered security, not the security of the nation state. Terrorism, crime and war are all examples of violence that destabilizes the security of people, but their security is also affected by deprivation – whether it is the result of poverty or environmental pollution or disease and malnutrition or illiteracy or all of them combined. As noted in the UN Charter over 60 years ago, real security can only come in a world where people are free from want and free from fear. To move toward such a world, people must be free of the fear of both direct and indirect violence. Article 26 of the Charter calls upon states to not divert human and economic resources to armaments, but instead to benefit their people.

At the conference, we discussed what violence looks like from a woman's perspective. It looks like domestic violence – men beating their wives and children because they can. It is the use of rape as a weapon of war – using the bodies of women to humiliate and so destroy families and communities, whether in Darfur or in Burma. It is so-called “honor” killing – men murdering women to “protect the honor” of the other men in their families. It is occupation. It is military invasion. But to describe all the forms of violence against women, direct and indirect, would take a tome.

In Galway, 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 oil resources in the Middle East. We discussed the role of the media in dismissing and/or trivializing the voices of women, as if the only things 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, and stopping the madness of the proliferation of weapons around the world that fuel the wars that kill us and 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, the Middle East or anywhere else in the world.

Women make up more than half of the population of the globe, and still we are denied our rightful place, one of dignity and equality, whether it is 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, yet 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 gathered in Galway at the first conference of the Nobel Women's Initiative know that we live in cultures of violence, whichever country we come from, and that our collective goal is to build cultures of peace – sustainable peace focused on the security of the individual and not the security of the state – one community at a time. We recognize that violence is not just something that “bubbles up” in human beings. Violence is a choice. It is an individual choice and a choice made by society either to condemn violence or to 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. The Galway conference was just one link in the common work we are forging to build a world with justice and equality for us all.

We remain grateful that some of the most prolific women peace activists shared with us their ideas as to how the Nobel Women's Initiative can use our combined visibility to advance some of the issues addressed in Galway. We feel strongly empowered by these women and have agreed to take the many suggestions with us to assess how we can best respond concretely and practically to the broad array of actions before us.

Some, but by no means all, of the myriad suggestions included:

Support for the Iraqi people and opposition to the Iraq Oil Law

Conference participants Antonia Juhasz from the US and Yanar Mohammed from Iraq educated us on the perils of this proposed Oil Law. While the Bush administration has repeatedly claimed that the war in Iraq is not about oil, US oil corporations are poised to take control of the country's 115 billion barrels of known oil reserves – 10 percent of the world total. The Bush administration's proposed new Oil Law for Iraq would change Iraq's oil industry from a nationalized model to a capitalist model that is much more amenable to US corporate control. Its provisions would allow oil revenues to flow out of Iraq and into the pockets of international oil companies. Immediately following the conference, we worked closely with Yanar Mohammed and Antonia Juhasz to increase awareness and opposition to the Iraq Oil Law. On June 19, 2007, Betty Williams, Mairead Corrigan Maguire, Jody Williams, Shirin Ebadi and Wangari Maathai released a statement announcing their opposition not only to the Oil Law, but also to US government pressure on the Iraqis to pass the law. Rigoberta Menchu Tum later signed the statement, which was translated into Arabic. US Congressman Jim McDermott (Dem.) of Washington sent a copy to every member of the US Congress. United Press International wrote a story on its release, and Jody Williams and Antonia Juhasz conducted interviews on radio stations across the US. In Iraq, Yanar Mohammed has organized a growing network of activists working together to oppose the Oil Law, and they circulated a petition. The statement can be found in Appendix C, and background documents and accounts of actions taken have been posted on the NWI site. Oil Change International and other groups are currently working on printing the Arabic version of the statement in Iraqi newspapers.

Call for the end of all occupation

Many participants provided excellent testimony and analysis about the situation of women living under occupation, particularly Israeli occupation. June 5, 2007, marked the 40th anniversary of the Six Day War in which the Israeli Army took military control of the Palestinian Gaza Strip and West Bank, including East Jerusalem. On that date Jody Williams, together with Archbishop Desmond Tutu, addressed a special meeting of the European Parliament on the Darfur crisis. She began her remarks by noting the anniversary of the occupation: “Surely after 40 years, it is clear that there is no military solution to this horrific situation. Negotiations can be the only solution. But, as one Palestinian woman said to us last week in Ireland at the First International Conference of the Nobel Women's Initiative, ‘We are always told that we must coexist. But how can we coexist when we do not

exist in the first place?’ It is time to end the Israeli occupation and negotiate a solution – a solution that takes into account the human, social, economic, political and security needs of all, including the 8 million Palestinians outside their homeland.”

Attending a June 9 demonstration in London’s Trafalgar Square marking the anniversary, Mairead Corrigan Maguire called for an end to 40 years of occupation and a negotiated settlement to the conflict between Israel and Palestine. “It is over 30 years since many of us from Northern Ireland stood here in Trafalgar Square, calling for a peaceful settlement to the Northern Irish conflict.... Today in Northern Ireland the guns are silent and we are building genuine democracy. The Israeli/Palestinian people have suffered enough and want peace. It is time for [their] governments to start talking.”

In order to better understand the realities on the ground that women activists are facing and creatively confronting, and to better inform our actions on this important issue, we are planning to send a small NWI delegation, led by Mairead Corrigan Maguire, to Israel and Palestine in the first half of 2008. We look forward to meeting many conference participants there and learning from them and their communities.

Continued and increased support for the One Million Signatures Petition Campaign for equality for Iranian women

Participants from Iran eloquently shared stories and images of their Million Signatures Campaign, a grassroots petition and education project calling for an end to discriminatory laws against women in Iran. They informed us about the increased persecution of women’s rights defenders in Iran, with the recent arrests of dozens of students and other activists who are involved in the campaign. Charges against them have ranged from “endangering national security” to “propaganda against the state” to “taking part in an illegal gathering.” After the conference, NWI enhanced our webpage on these activists and updated our “Take Action” page in support of the petition. In July, Shirin Ebadi wrote to the Hon. Ms. Louise Arbour, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, appealing for a United Nations delegation to visit Iran to investigate the status of women who have been arrested and sentenced, as well as to look into the dangerous state of affairs for women’s rights defenders in general. NWI sent a letter to the High Commissioner in support of Shirin Ebadi’s appeal. Arbour visited Iran in September. Also in July, NWI issued a call for the government of Iran to immediately release Haleh Esfandiari from Evin Prison, to drop all charges against her and to allow her to return to her home and family. Haleh Esfandiari, a dual Iranian-American national, is the director of the Middle East Program at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, DC. A renowned scholar in her own right, she was incarcerated by the Iranian authorities on May 8 and held in solitary confinement at Evin Prison for nearly four months. Shirin Ebadi, her lawyer, was not allowed to visit her, but vowed to prove Haleh’s innocence in court. On August 21, NWI welcomed news of Haleh’s release; she arrived home in the US on September 6.

Action to end women’s human rights violations in Darfur and support the people of Darfur

At the conference, Jody Williams shared her experiences leading the UN Human Rights Council’s High-Level Mission on Darfur, and Amira Khair and other activists from the region added their insights. As mentioned above, immediately after the conference Jody Williams and Archbishop Desmond Tutu briefed the European Parliament on actions they could and should take to end the Darfur conflict. They published an op-ed in the *Christian Science Monitor*, “Working together to save Darfur,” as well as others, and we have updated the “Take Action for Darfur” section on our website while continuing to explore follow-up actions. In September, with new personnel, NWI began working to develop our overall strategy on advocacy to end the crisis in Darfur and women’s rights violations there. We will also look at state-sponsored sexual violence and the use of rape as a weapon of war in Darfur, Burma and elsewhere. We will continue to highlight the role of China in the lead up to the Olympics in 2008.

Continued support for Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the people of Burma

A Burmese woman from the refugee camps in Thailand updated conference participants on the situation facing women in Burma and on rape as a weapon of war. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi turned 62 on June 19, which also marked 4,253 days under house arrest. We sent a birthday card, undoubtedly undelivered but the flood of cards encourages those inside Burma, and many participants urged their networks to do the same. NWI issued a statement, joining other international calls for an end to her detention, and updated “Action Alerts” for her and the people of Burma. As the “saffron revolution” began, followed by a military crackdown in August and September, NWI issued statements of support and Wangari Maathai delivered a petition on behalf of all of the women laureates to UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon. We wrote op-ed articles, including one by Jody Williams and Shirin Ebadi printed in Norway’s *Aftneposten*, and another by Jody Williams entitled “Freedom for Burma - China is propping up another despotic regime” published in the *Wall St Journal*.

Letter of support for women peace activists in Serbia

Igballe Rogova of the Kosovo Women’s Network updated participants on the advocacy efforts of feminists for a measure of autonomy in Kosovo’s final status, now a subject of UN talks. Participants suggested that NWI send a letter of support, which is being worked out with Igballe Rogova’s assistance.

Letter of support to Rigoberta Menchu Tum in her presidential campaign

Rigoberta Menchu Tum ran for president of Guatemala in September. She and her party encouraged indigenous women and men to participate in the political process and, despite deadly campaign violence that killed more than 40 people, election monitors report

efforts to bring women and indigenous people to the polls boosted turnout. Participants suggested we communicate our support for her. In July, Betty Williams and Jody Williams taped messages for use in her campaign. Throughout the year, we will support the Observatorio de Transgresión Feminista (Women's Transformation Watch: Women Crossing the Line). This innovative political strategy, coordinated by diverse organizations and activists, takes a fresh approach to mobilizing the physical and virtual solidarity of women everywhere, using radio and other communications to spotlight the women most affected by injustices. Two upcoming activities include one "watch" around efforts to halt the ratification of the Central America Free Trade Agreement in Costa Rica in September and another around the Guatemalan elections in November.

Raising of awareness about the conflict in North Uganda, insisting on women's participation in the peace negotiations

Florence Akao, Gladys Faddy Canogura and Jane Akwero Odwong shared their recommendations for ending the conflict in North Uganda and their experiences advocating for women's participation in the peace negotiations. They demonstrated how they are effectively using UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on the ground, but reported that women remain marginalized from the formal peace talks. NWI will work with them to see how we might best contribute.

Continued support for disarmament campaigns, including the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons and the Cluster Munitions Coalition.

Felicity Hill and Merav Datan's presentations inspired participants to support the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons and work toward a Nuclear Weapons Convention, as well as to promote a nuclear-free Middle East. NWI will continue to do so, updating our website accordingly, and will continue to encourage other networks to join the campaign. Nancy Ingram provided information on the Cluster Munitions Campaign. NWI will continue to support the historic process currently under way to develop and negotiate a comprehensive international treaty rejecting cluster munitions and dealing with their devastating effects. Jody Williams will participate in the full process, ensuring the release of NWI statements and support at timely and strategic moments, as the "Oslo process" works to achieve its goal of concluding a treaty by mid-2008.

Support for reform of the UN Gender Equality architecture and the implementation of Security Council Resolution 1325

Brigid Inder, Jane Akwero Odwong, Charlotte Bunch and Shirin Ershadi led us in exploring the effective use of international normative frameworks and institutions including Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace & Security and the International Criminal Court. In examining the potential of real reform of the UN Gender Equality architecture, including the new UN agency for women, participants encouraged us to support this as best we can. We will continue to do so, taking the lead from partners working intimately on this issue.

Engagement in, and support of, creative and proactive media strategies

Many participants discussed the importance of media strategies and encouraged us to support existing women's media to enhance its impact, encourage the inclusion of women's rights information in other grassroots media and find ways to amplify women's voices in mainstream media. NWI will continue discussing and exploring such strategies.

The Nobel Women's Initiative (NWI) was formed in January 2006 after discussions held by Shirin Ebadi, Jody Williams and Wangari Maathai while we met in Nairobi in December 2004. Those discussions developed from a suggestion by Shirin that we women recipients of the Nobel Peace Prize work together, using our prestige and access, to support women around the world who are working to stop violence against women – in all forms and under all circumstances. The NWI brings together six of the seven women in the world today who have received the Nobel Peace Prize – our sister Aung San Suu Kyi of Burma, of course, cannot be with us because she continues to be imprisoned by the military dictatorship clinging to power in her country.



"We recognized that women are not exclusively 'victims' of war, nor passive subjects of political repression. Rather, women have responded to crisis, conflict, and oppression with highly innovative, assertive, and dynamic strategies of resistance and survival." — Rebecca Barlow

[L to R] Nobel Laureates Jody Williams, Betty Williams, Shirin Ebadi and Mairead Corrigan Maguire.