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THE VAN LEER JERUSALEM INSTITUTE

معهد فان لير في القدس

WOMEN
IN CONFLICT ZONES
STRUGGLING WITH ETHNO - NATIONAL AND RACIAL CONFLICTS

THE MEDITERRANEAN FORUM
Directed by Hanna Herzog and Kinneret Lahad

A Report on a Women's Workshop held at
The Van Leer Jerusalem Institute

Maya Kahanoff

On The Van Leer Jerusalem Institute

The Van Leer Jerusalem Institute is a leading intellectual centre for the interdisciplinary study and discussion of issues related to philosophy, society, culture and education. The Institute gives expression to the wide range of opinions in Israel, taking particular pride in its role as an incubator and creative home for many of today's most important civil society efforts to enhance and deepen Israeli democracy.

Founded in 1959 by the Van Leer family from The Netherlands, the Institute and its mission are based on the Van Leers' vision of Israel as a homeland for the Jewish people and as a democratic society, predicated on justice, fairness and equality for all. The Institute's work today, still indelibly shaped by the Van Leers' legacy, is designed to enhance ethnic and cultural understanding, ameliorate social tensions, empower civil society players and promote democratic values.

The Institute pursues its mandate by employing different methodologies: academic research, public policy analysis, advocacy and civil society projects. Throughout its history, the Institute has initiated or participated in more than 200 different projects, which are clustered broadly under four umbrellas:

- Advanced Learning
- Israeli Civil Society
- Jewish Culture and Identity
- Mediterranean Cultures and Society

Activities range from the sponsorship of domestic and international conferences, symposia and workshops to the publication of periodicals, books and monographs to the initiation of grassroots dialogue and major educational initiatives. The Institute actively promotes a pluralist public dialogue by making its intellectual and academic work accessible and by seeking wide input and representation in all of its endeavors.

The Van Leer Jerusalem Institute is located in Jerusalem's Rehavia district, adjacent to the President's residence. Our facilities include a 250-seat auditorium and conference rooms which are fitted with the latest multimedia capabilities, such as closed-curcuit television and amenities for disabled lecturers and members of the public. As a centre for advanced learning, the Institute houses a unique, 30,000-volume library focused on the history of ideas. The library strives to offer an interdisciplinary perspective on the history and philosophy of science, historical sociology and political theory.

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Preface

The following pages are distilled from a gripping and on occasion heartrending three-day workshop that was held at the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute in March 2000. The workshop brought together twenty women from Africa, the Middle East and Europe who shared a common experience: they all came from societies tormented by prolonged, violent conflicts. Their motives for coming together were varied and complex, but for the most part it was their desire to find out about each other's experiences as women, as social activists, and as survivors of their respective national struggles.

The idea of the workshop came to me as a result of a sustained and intimate exposure to the civic struggle waged in the South African townships against apartheid. Over the course of 1984 to 1987 I came to know an 'army' of South African women who in many ways carried the South African liberation struggle on their backs. My growing sense that women play a unique role in protracted violent conflict was reinforced when I became involved in grassroots training in the West Bank and Gaza in 1994. There, too, I came across Palestinian women who played critical roles as civic and political activists without relinquishing or abdicating their roles as mothers and wives.

The ability to carry out two contradictory sets of roles – as participants and carriers of the national struggle on one hand, and as preservers of family and normative order on the other hand – astounded and fascinated me. It appeared as if the logic of the struggle and the requirements it placed on women did not spill over and affect their socially stabilizing roles as agents of religious and cultural socialization. My curiosity about this dual gender role was formalized in a brief paper that struck a chord with the British Council personnel in East Jerusalem, and led to the eventual convening of this unique workshop.

In the hope that women activists in violent conflict situations might shed some light on the mental mechanisms that shaped their conduct within the conflict, we invited around twenty women from different nations affected by protracted crises, including South Africa, Northern Ireland, the former Yugoslavia, Israel

and Palestine. The women we decided to invite were grassroots activists with direct personal involvement in the field. We were not interested in scholarly theorizing but in the raw account of women activists.

Our main aim in facilitating the workshop was to examine the conscious roles the women played in crisis situations. We hoped to discover the main strategies they developed and employed, as well as the explicit and self-conscious nature of these strategies.

I leave it to the reader of this fascinating account to judge just how successful this unique experiment was. Personally, I believe this was an important experience both for the participants themselves and for the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute, and will be meaningful for women activists who read this document. What is particularly noteworthy is that it highlights systematic similarities in women's behaviour in social crises, as distinct as the ones in South Africa and Bosnia. The knowledge that women in these different areas share common fears and common roles had a liberating effect on the participants. I hope that the experiences presented here will assist field workers and women in different communities in dealing with conflict and its aftermath. I hope this project stimulates further research within the areas of gender studies and conflict resolution which will be of practical relevance to women activists and scholars alike.

Finally I want to acknowledge and thank the many individuals who have made this publication possible. First and foremost, we are all deeply indebted to the twenty courageous women who agreed to share their life stories and struggles with us.

We are grateful to the British Consulate General for their funding and the British Council in East Jerusalem for their warm support. We would like to extend special thanks to the previous British Consul General H. E. Robin Keely and Consul Jayd Davis, and to the British Council Team: David Martin (former Director), Saad Halawani (Projects Manager), Jeremy Chivers (former Projects Coordinator), Emma Sky (Governance Adviser), and Hadeel Nasser (Projects Officer) for their conviction, hard work and dedication to the success of this project

We are especially grateful to Dr. Maya Kahanoff who has done an excellent job of editing the impossibly huge verbatim record of the workshop to produce a coherent and insightful manuscript. I would also like to thank the Academic Director of the Project, Prof. Hannah Herzog, the Project Director, Kinneret Lahad, and Amit Leshem who assisted along the way. A special tribute should be paid to Hagai Boaz and Shoham Melamed for their hard work on earlier versions of the text, Ronna Brayer-Garb for her editorial work, and Tal Kohavi and Nimrod Ben-Cnaan for their thoughtful reviews and comments. Much invaluable help was offered by Sara Soreni and the VLJI's dedicated staff.

Dr. Shimshon Zelniker
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Women and Conflict

Although everyone suffers in war, battles, and prolonged conflicts, women's suffering is amplified by the many structured roles they play in society.

Conflict affects women's lives and identities in numerous ways. As individuals, they are at physical risk. As wives, they frequently run the home and family unit. In times of conflict, women must often maintain the family on their own, find shelter and housing, and carry on with the daily routines of the civil community in order to survive. As mothers, they strive to protect their children. This often requires immense effort to find them food and clean water. These extra responsibilities may overburden them with additional concerns and anxieties. When men go to war or are arrested for resistance activities, the women find themselves serving as principal breadwinner and sole caretaker of the children, having to toil incessantly to meet their family's needs.

Societies shape gender identities and relations in a way that fosters male domination (patriarchal structure). In societies wracked by prolonged conflict, the concept of war is glorified and fighters are viewed as heroes. Women become even more marginalized and oppressed and suffer the consequences of male aggression. Violence is expressed by society at large and within the home, where the domestic environment becomes yet another battlefield. Therefore, for women the struggle for national causes becomes intertwined with the struggle for their own rights in society, compounding the challenges that face them.

The women who participated in the workshop at the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute, who have been involved in complicated struggles, have developed strategies for resisting various types of oppression while contributing to peacemaking and reconciliation. The literature on gender and conflict suggests that the unique qualities of women as mothers and caretakers make them ideal agents for social change and facilitators of responsible reconciliation and peace. This is why it is so important to share (these) women's experiences as a way of empowering other women dealing with conflict, as well as to increase awareness of the role that women can play in peacemaking processes.

The following pages present some of the experiences related by these exceptional women[1]. They describe the processes by which they became politically active, giving us insight into the coping methods and strategies that can be used by other women exposed to violent conflict and the struggle for social change.

[1] The names used here have been changed to protect the privacy of the participants.

Women's Experiences of Violent Conflict

Gender strongly determines individual identity and shapes an individual's perceptions of self and the environment. Some consider gender to be the primal and most significant reference group, both socially and individually. In most societies women are socialized into gendered roles and traits. They are expected to remain in the private sphere and fulfil a reproductive role, so that motherhood becomes a major component in the formation of their identities. Men, on the other hand, are usually socialized into roles as combatants and participants in political activity in the public domain.

Women are marginalized in the public and political sphere and often excluded from the main circles of power in their own communities. They are also dominated in the private sphere: at home, within the family, in their intimate relationships (where they may become targets of violence).

In most societies, the military plays a major role in shaping gender identities and gender relations, especially in war zones.

Cynthia Enloe, in *Does Khaki Become You?*, argues that the army has a significant role in the formation and reproduction of the patriarchal structure of society, due to the central weight of battle in the construction of male identities and in the legitimization of male supremacy. For example, the Israeli state's doctrine of 'national security,' argue feminist sociologists, depends both upon men who are ready to serve as soldiers, as fighters on the battlefield, and upon women who are ready to adapt to the needs of the Israeli collective experience. On the one hand, they claim, women are socialized into the roles of unconditional supporters, exceptional caretakers, and guardians of the home front; on the other hand, they are expected to remain vulnerable and in need of protection.

Male violence against women has been reported to increase in conflict or war zones. Feminist writers explain the increase of male violence in the home as a reaction to men's loss of control in situations of oppression and

occupation. In such situations, they explain, men increase their reliance on violent action to establish and maintain a sex-role hierarchy in which they are dominant. Their need to dominate women, coupled with suppressed aggression toward those who rule over them (or over whom they rule), places the domestic environment at the centre of explosive tensions that lead to violence. Women are the targets, because there is no fear that men will suffer or be severely punished if they hurt women, especially wives and lovers, whereas they would face sanctions if they violently attacked official targets such as police officers and soldiers.

The 'cycle of violence' that begins with psychological abuse in the public world, where the male may be subjected to control by a humiliating and degrading authority figure, has been described by bell hooks. Men suppress this violence (since they do not want to risk punishment, losing their job, or imprisonment) and release it in a 'controlled' situation in which they need not fear retaliation and will not suffer as a consequence of violent action. The home is usually this controlled situation and the target of the abuse is usually a female. Though a male's own expression of violence against women may stem from his emotional pain, that pain is released and projected onto the female.

According to bell hooks, women often accept violence in intimate relationships because they do not want to give up the man's care and love and see continuing abuse as the price they have to pay. She notes another reason why women may not leave violent relationships. The poor experience so many different kinds of oppression that their response to violence may be similar to that to other forms of abuse. For example, the vast majority of poor Black women in the United States are subjected to continual abuse in public agencies, shops, and the like and consequently expect abuse to be an element of their personal interactions. They are more inclined to accept it in situations where there are other certain rewards or benefits, so that abuse is not the sole characteristic of the interaction.

Disillusionment

Mary, from Northern Ireland, works in a women and children's centre in Belfast. Her story exemplifies violence that encompasses all spheres of life, penetrating even her home. Belfast, where Mary grew up, is a city divided between two communities, Protestant and Catholic, who have been fighting for years over issues of religion and national identity. Growing up with 'The Troubles' she witnessed bloodshed, terror, and hatred:

> [I was] about the age of ten when the riots in the streets started. Stone-throwing and things like... I have seen many murders... My first experience was when I was about ten years old. I was raised in a place called Shankill Road, where we lived very close together and women would stand at their front doors. My mother was talking to this lady at her front door and I was beside her, aged ten, when a bullet just went through this woman and blew her stomach apart. It was a sniper's bullet. I still don't know what she had done. This was the beginning of when I started to get frightened. This was serious... We had pubs on nearly every corner, and in a very short time, on this Shankill Road, every pub was bombed, every single pub... Going to school I had to pass all these pubs and just missed being blown up coming up the Shankill Road.

Her story unfolds the experience of a small girl exposed to the atrocities of life. She was robbed of the innocence of childhood. Then the teenage illusion of a happy marriage was shattered. First, her teenage boyfriend was murdered by the IRA: 'It was pretty traumatic, being a teenager and thinking I was going to live happily ever after. But it didn't work out.' Then she married a 'so called terrorist who had served his time,' which brought the violence into her own home.

'Being at home wasn't pleasant,' recalled Mary. 'He had psychological problems because of having done the jail time... I suffered from some domestic violence and that was that.' This is her summary of painful experiences that continued for seven years, during which time two children were born. Then Mary decided to leave and got divorced.

According to Begona Aretxaga, an anthropologist who conducted an ethnographic study of the violence in Northern Ireland, the Belfast experience was shaped by collective images and stories, silences, and the on-going reshaping of ethnic difference via the practice of violence. The women activists whom she interviewed claimed that the violence (especially British army brutality) they witnessed had a profound impact on them in their early teens and frequently pushed them into armed struggle. They indicated that they had learned their politics in the street by witnessing what was going on. Aretxaga agrees with feminist scholar Joan Scott about the power of experience and notes that 'witnessing had for these prisoners the force of self-evidence, the power of knowledge that needs no further elaboration.'

Mary had the courage and resolution to step out of this situation. She resisted not only her physical oppression and abuse by her husband, but also her own mental state of victimhood. *'I absolutely refused to let where I was living, my husband, my surroundings, affect me this way.'* She decided to get herself a job, even though it was far away and required that she travel back and forth between Protestant and Catholic neighbourhoods.

Later Mary combined her personal insights, courage, and commitment to help other women in need and joined a centre for women and children in Belfast. She provides support to mothers under stress from a predominantly Catholic area, mobilizing her connections in the Protestant community to raise funds to improve education and empower women.

Some participants in the workshop asked Mary about the difficulties of being a single parent in a traditional community. A Palestinian participant was concerned about the specific effect on the children of a single-parent family, in view of the social norms favouring conventional families. She wondered about their potential vulnerability and asked whether a teacher or others had confronted Mary's children with the implication that certain behaviours were the result of growing up in a single-parent family. Mary assured her, sadly, that in Belfast her situation was not at all exceptional. In her son's class, she related, 'there is a lot of lone parents over the years, not because of divorce,

but there was a lot of lone parents when husbands go to jail.' She said that children there have various problems, but not necessarily ones which relate to growing up in a single-parent family.

Mary also spoke about the dangers of peer-group influence on youngsters growing up in conflict areas. Their role models are violent and exert social pressure on them to come for dangerous and illegal rides; the children are exposed to drugs and domestic violence.

> From 1969 to 1994 you had the paramilitaries. They were using children, teenagers, 13, 14, 15, for hijacking cars. They used them for stone throwers. Then these children got their culture and they started doing it for themselves, and when the children got older they did it themselves for the fun, they hijacked a car, went joyriding... The problem is children getting out of the control of their parents and becoming very attracted to that situation.

Raising Children in Wartime

Mary shared her difficulties as a parent and described her own dilemmas about the responsibility of raising children in such violent and chaotic situations. On the one hand she wants to protect her children; but she also wants to offer them the freedom to experience and develop independently.

> At times of conflict riots and things... we are instructed don't go here. You don't go there because of your own protection. I don't like to say anything because she gets angry at me because *I am trying to protect her, but she does not see that.*

Another dilemma she raised, relevant to parents in conflict zones, concerns her desire to educate her children to be open and tolerant so they will not perpetuate the cycle of hatred. At the same time, she feels a responsibility to teach them to be cautious and give them the ability to spot danger.

> I think I have tried my best, coming from my own experience. I have Catholic friends, they come to my house, and I went on holiday with a Catholic girlfriend and her kids... I try to let my children... meet the person first. They don't meet their religion first, which is

usually what happens in Northern Ireland... *I try to let my children see the person.*

She takes the time to respond to her children's curiosity about differences between families and their religious traditions; for example, explaining why they don't celebrate St. Patrick's Day while others do. She does her best to convey positive attitudes and instil respect for diversity. 'I remember my mother not explaining to me, so I am explaining to my children the best I can.'

Conflict situations have a negative impact on educational systems; children pay the price of lost classroom hours. Mary epitomizes this cost of the Troubles.

> *The conflict robbed me of my education...* Schooling was destructed for years. We had bomb scares, which meant somebody rang and said there was a bomb in the school and we all had to go home... When a bomb went off, you started worrying: was my parent in time? Was my brother in time? You know the whole classroom used to talk about this particular bomb... This went on for many years.

With the worsening of the economic situation, Mary had to leave school and go to work. 'I left school at the age of sixteen, but with no qualifications at all,' she says bitterly. 'I was the youngest of a family of nine and it was important then to bring money into the home, so I went straight into a factory to work and brought money home.'

A Stranger in Her Own Country

A Palestinian woman who participated in the workshop told about the difficulties faced by Palestinians living in Israel. They are marginalized both in the Palestinian community outside Israel (for remaining within a Jewish state) and in Israeli society, with its Jewish majority.

Inas, who grew up and lives in Nazareth, relates her experiences of discrimination, humiliation, and hopelessness:

> *This place* [Israel] *is pushing me down...* We Palestinians, we are

> down. Because it is a Jewish state, the Palestinian can grow up so far, and if you have energy you have a choice, to continue with them and do whatever they want you to do, or to decide you have to fight... It is your land, but it is not your state... I think that all the time that I want to continue something is pushing me down. Sometimes I think it is easier to die because they say to you they don't care about you. *Everywhere you go you are an Arab.* It is not the colour, but *you are a Palestinian, you are a terrorist.* If you want to go shopping and someone hears you speaking Arabic, he will take you to the side and will check you. A lot of Palestinians in Israel don't speak in the Arabic language. They prefer to speak Hebrew because they are afraid.

She told about her problems trying to advance projects for Arab citizens of Israel and meeting with repeated rejection. 'All my energy, my good will, and time were wasted for nothing.' However, she claims, 'these experiences only shaped and strengthened my political views and opinions regarding the impossibility of a real democracy in Israel. I realized how discrimination works... *This bitter experience matured me and I became less naive.*'

The experience of feeling a stranger in her own country was also conveyed by *Helen,* who comes from a small town in Croatia. She was born into a mixed family, her father an Orthodox Serb and her mother a Catholic Croat. Before the war she worked for an optician in Zagreb and was studying optometry herself. The bombing of her house uprooted her family and they were forced to live in a refugee camp near Zagreb. She recalls:

> I remember when the war in Yugoslavia broke out and we could not stay in our house any more. It was unbelievable – suddenly you realize that *the place you grew up in became a place of war and physical danger,* and you have to leave it in order to survive. We packed only a few bags, since we were sure it is only a temporary situation, and we left our home. We went to a special place for refugees. We lived there for a while not knowing exactly when we will be back. I remember that one of my neighbours in the refugee camp died all of a sudden. I was shocked when I found out that he

was actually murdered. I asked why, but nobody had an answer. People just died because of the situation. Some were killed for no reason. *Being a refugee meant being defenseless.* We had no one to protect us. Actually, this was one of the reasons that drove me to volunteer in a centre for refugees when the war ended.

At the time of the workshop Helen was working in a centre for educating and counselling women, which provides courses for women in rural and urban areas in Croatia. Barry Hart, an American scholar, worked with CARE International on trauma awareness and conflict transformation in the former Yugoslavia. He describes the painful emotional impact of the war on people who lost their home and family and the damage to their perception of self and mental stability. Refugees may fall into a state of shock and confusion leading to denial, anger, a desire for revenge and other psychological responses. Counselling services such as those described by Helen were created to ease the trauma and problems created by the war and later by the return of refugees and to foster healing.

The traumatic experience of *life as a refugee* is also a central theme in Shams' story. *Shams,* a Palestinian, grew up in a refugee camp. Thousands of Palestinians left their homes and villages during the war in 1948 (when Israel was established). Since then they have been living as refugees in camps in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and Arab countries.

Shams was born in Jordan to a Palestinian family that had fled Israel in 1948. For many years she had no identity card and was deprived of basic civil rights. Shams related her experience of growing up as a 'refugee,' emphasizing the damage to her self-image and sense of security.

> In 1948 my family became refugees. This was not the destiny of all Palestinians. Some of them remained in their villages and became a part of Israel under a military rule. When I was a child, I went out of the camp and met other Palestinians, who remained in their villages and were saved from the destiny of being refugees. Surprisingly, they were hostile towards me. *They called me a refugee with an expression of disgust* on their face. It was horrible. We could take this attitude from the Jews, but coming from our

brothers, the Israeli Palestinians, it was too painful.

Throughout my childhood I felt like *I was nothing, human dirt.* The refugees are always the ones to blame. In the camp itself life was a living hell. I used to play with my friends in the mud; we actually lived with an open sewer. We walked around the camp in bare feet. We had lice in our hair; we had no food, dirty clothes, and all of the children in my family, ten of us, lived in one room. One of the most traumatic memories of my childhood is us, the children, fighting over a small piece of bread. I can go on describing the feeling of being a refugee but this is really something you have to experience in order to truly understand what it means.

Until today, I feel like a refugee deep inside. This experience will follow me to my grave. I still feel *a little bit less than other people.*

In spite of the overwhelming difficulties she faced, Shams was able to go to university and holds an M.A. in early childhood education. She and her husband have established an education centre in Gaza.

Surviving in Jail

Zahira's story depicts the determination of a Palestinian woman living under Israeli occupation to resist the military occupation and fight for independence. Eventually she became a physician; today she works for UNRWA. She was arrested frequently because of her political activism and suffered physical and mental torture in Israeli prisons. She told the participants about the torture she suffered during her many days and nights in jail.

I think this was one of the most difficult memories in my life, because I couldn't imagine, and still I cannot imagine that a human being can try to ruin another human being in such a brutal way. The torture that was systematic, not for me only but for all the Palestinian prisoners, *was psychological torture and physical torture.* The physical torture extends from being beaten, from being treated with the end of the cigarettes directly on your skin, from having your hands tied either upwards or downwards or backwards, having

> been in the sun without water for 48 hours... I was deprived of water for 48 hours and sometimes we had to drink from our urine. We were urinating and drinking our urine to compensate for that.

She describes the inhuman conditions and the psychological despair she felt during her initial days in prison:

> In the cell was a big rock and I found a lot of blood clotted under it... I also found a finger... It was very devastating, very depressing and I felt that probably I would go to pieces the way they treat people there.

She expressed the difficulty of seeing her colleagues and comrades being beaten in front of her. It was particularly hard to hear from women who were raped. 'I was spared of rape because I was a physician', Zahira said.

Feminist scholar Simona Sharoni, who published a book about the impact of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on women, wrote:

> Palestinian women's identities and bodies have in fact become the battlefields for both types of nationalism: Israeli national security on one hand and Palestinian national liberation on the other... The Israeli military has used the discourse of national security to justify the massive arrests of Palestinian women and their interrogation. Threats and actual sexual assaults were used during interrogations to pressure women into giving incriminating evidence against family members and to force the families to turn over Palestinian fugitives to Israeli authorities, as well as to deter women from resisting the occupation.

Zahira was considered an extremely unusual prisoner, because she did not fit the stereotype of a Palestinian woman, who is expected to remain behind the curtain, obedient and passive. Zahira recalls:

> They were bringing people to look at me. I was feeling some times that I was taken to the zoo. They would bring everyone to see and say: 'Look, look, *this is a woman, and a physician, and she is a terrorist.*' These were the three words that I was always hearing, and

> some people were coming from the outside, looking Jewish, to look at me, while they were telling them, 'this is this woman, physician, terrorist.'

Prisoners consider female Palestinian political prisoners to be on the lowest rung. Zahira felt ostracized even in that already marginalized environment.

> We got to be sometimes with Israeli prisoners – non-political ones, who were told that we are murderers of Israelis. So we were threatened that we are going to be killed by them. One night one of the non-political Jewish prisoners started to choke one of us while we were sleeping... Since then one of us always stayed awake during the night to watch for the others. We saved the lives of each other.

Zahira was very angry when relating this particular experience:

> Actually I was out of my nerves, because of the bad treatment, the discriminative treatment that we had... so I decided *either you die or we live with a little bit of dignity*... I protested and said: 'We are political prisoners, we should keep ourselves as the image of political prisoners,' because it is different with the others. This is what the Geneva Accord said about political prisoners. I saw that I am not treated [medically] at all, not even as the criminal prisoners, some of whom were drug addicts. They were treated much much better, a hundred times better than me.

Zahira decided to act to change the situation and demanded that political and non-political prisoners be separated.

> We thought that as Palestinian political prisoners we should be separated from the non-political ones. We decided to keep ourselves updated with science, with politics, with other issues and with the Palestinian issue. We should keep in contact with our comrades and our brothers and outside people. So we started to organize ourselves and the first thing we did was to tell the administration of the prison that we wanted to be separated. We had gone through a big struggle because the administration did not

> agree. At that time we were in the cells for 24 hours, without going out, and the rooms were very small, two meters by twelve and a half meters and six of us were there... So we decided to go on a strike. We started striking for going outside.

She was chosen to represent the political prisoners in this struggle for their rights.

> I was very stubborn about certain principles such as that they should see us as human beings... and they should not treat us as animals... When they did not respond we went on a hunger strike. We co-ordinated this with our colleagues in other jails and it started the strike all over. It was a very famous strike of all the jails (1986). In the Palestinian street they went on strike with us, and this started to be a whole Palestinian movement against torture for all the female political prisoners... Many of us had asthma... One lady was almost dying... Finally we had the victory to be separated from the non-political prisoners.

Huneida Ghanem, an Israeli Palestinian sociologist, has written about the pressure on women activists in general and on female political prisoners in particular. In the conservative and traditional reality of Palestinian society, honour remains the mainstay of the moral and social order, argues Ghanem, dictating separation of the sexes and requiring that women remain at home, as mothers and wives. In such a society, female political activists, and political prisoners in particular, have been pioneers in overcoming the restrictions of conventional gender roles, such as home and motherhood. They have crossed over from private space into public space, an area traditionally associated with masculine roles.

Ghanem notes that even though on the national level the female prisoner is glorified no less than her male counterpart, she suffers from various forms of subjugation, including ostracism by relatives and neighbours and an inability to find a husband after her release from prison. The underlying cause for the latter is the traditional association between captivity and rape, with the associated loss of honour that Palestinian society regards as a value to be preserved at all cost.

On the one hand, the female prisoner is exalted as a fighter and a heroine. On the other hand, she is stigmatized as a woman who has stepped out of the private feminine sphere into the public masculine one. Thus suggests Ghanem, the agenda of Palestinian woman activists combines a political struggle with a social struggle for women's rights in general and for female prisoners in particular. She emphasizes the ambivalence within Palestinian society caused by the conflict between the desire to have women participate in the national liberation struggle and the tendency to relegate them to the traditional role of preserving the existing social structure.

The continuing conflict and the Palestinian uprising against the Israeli occupation have ruptured Palestinian family structures. Many men have been detained for long periods (some were deported), leaving the women to fill in as heads of families. In other cases, when men chose to stay out of trouble so they could go to work and provide for their families, the women took to the streets and participated actively in the popular uprising. In both cases women became powerful, thereby posing a challenge (and threat) to the traditional and patriarchal Palestinian society.

Relationships within Palestinian families were further disrupted by Israeli soldiers who broke into their houses at night to search for suspects and weapons and often hauled off the men for questioning. These acts – invading the intimate space of the home, humiliating parents in front of their children and revealing their helplessness – destabilized the traditional hierarchical social structure.

From Personal Experience To Collective Consciousness

The women who participated in the workshop discussed the process by which they came to realize that their experiences were not unique but a common problem. They gained insight into the relationship between their daily lives and struggles and the socio-political and historical context in which they occur. As demonstrated in the literature on women's lives and struggles around the world, women who become politically active in their communities attain a higher level of personal and political consciousness and awareness of the link between the political and the personal.

Some of the participants recalled particular moments that served as turning points in the development and consolidation of their political perspectives.

Catherine, born and raised in Soweto, South Africa, is the national president of the Black Housewives League of South Africa, an organization she helped establish. She fought the apartheid regime for many years, was imprisoned several times, and brought up her sons in exile. She traces the beginning of her socio-political awareness to her education in a missionary school. She said that it was the Biblical teaching *'that I am born free and nobody has the right to oppress me'* that inspired her later political activism.

'As I grew up and came in contact with other people, *I began to think and to compare* how I was treated because of my colour, and how other people were treated because of their colour'. She realized at a very young age that *'colour played a very important part in our country.'* Its use as a criterion of discrimination and oppression 'created in me a rebellious little girl. Every time I asked "why?" And that "why" brought me a lot of answers.'

Grace Lee Boggs and James Boggs have written about the function of *rebellion* (as a stage in the development of revolution):

> It is an important stage because it represents the 'standing up,' the assertion of their humanity on the part of the oppressed. Rebellion informs both the oppressed and everybody else that a situation has

become intolerable. They establish a form of communication among the oppressed themselves and at the same time open the eyes and ears of people who have been blind and deaf to the fate of their fellow citizens. Rebellions break the threads that have been holding the system together and throw into question the legitimacy and the supposed permanence of existing institutions. They shake up old values so that relations between individuals and between groups within a society are unlikely ever to be the same again. The inertia of the society has been interrupted.

A Voice out of Anger

Lina, a coloured woman and a Muslim, is one of the founders of the Women's Institute for Leadership, Democracy and Development in Roodeport, South Africa. Because of her mixed Indian and White ancestry she was an outcast in a society divided along lines of religion, race, and ethnicity and found herself excluded from all social groups.

She recounts the development of her social identity and political activism, catalyzed by her experience of discrimination and hatred, sexual harassment, and imprisonment. Her path also was one of anger and rebellion:

> I was not accepted by the Indian people because they would look at me and say, 'are you a Muslim? Why is your hair like that?' I was not accepted by the Black people because they would say to me, 'you are too white.' I was not accepted by White people because they would say 'you are Black and you have a strange hair.' I was not accepted by Christian people because I was Muslim. *My complex identity made me very angry and I raised my voice out of this anger.* I spoke on behalf of myself. I didn't belong to any organization.

Lina grew up as the child of a mixed marriage. She did not know her father and was separated from her mother at the age of 13. She moved to another town to live with her aunt only to be sexually abused by her aunt's White husband. She recalls the culmination of these harmful events:

> I did not know where to turn to. So the anger was already very very

> deep. The Group Areas Act moved me away from the safety of my family and my aunt's husband took the opportunity to sexually molest me. *The hatred to anybody with a white skin became very deep.* I went to school where I became politically aware of how the racial discrimination of Blacks in South Africa works. *The hurt was still inside me day after day until I couldn't take it anymore and I ran away.* Finally I joined my mother in Johannesburg where I became a rebel.

Rupert Taylor, a professor of political studies in South Africa, has referred to the apartheid regime as one of the most unjust and oppressive societies ever. Widespread suppression of human freedoms was enforced through systematic racial classification that subjected non-Whites to a daily routine of humiliation and deprivation.

Lina became extremely aware of the social injustice surrounding her. As an adult she began defending the rights of other people. She was labelled a troublemaker after she organized a parents' demonstration. She recalled another critical event on her path to political activism:

> I refused to stand up and bow to the South African flag because I felt it was not my flag. The pupils and the teachers at the school followed me. This was my first step as a political leader.

Later, when she organized a group of women to fight for their economic and social rights in the educational system, she was fired from her job.

Through her participation in a Black consciousness group, Lina met many women who had been beaten by males of their own families and by White men representing the state and authorities. She saw victims of sexual abuse who lived in great poverty in the ghetto and worked hard to provide for their children. She was determined to work in this area 'to politicize people' to fight against oppression of women by various modes of patriarchal oppression of women.

Lina joined a women's organization (the Soweto branch of the Federation of Transvaal Women) and began educating women to become more involved in the political process. Her work takes her to pre-schools, where she meets with mothers. She is also involved in developing educational materials on racism, sexism and gender roles, and power relations in society.

Out of Victimhood

Mary, from Northern Ireland, described the moment when, having been hurt and depressed by the violence as well as by her husband, she realized that she had to act in order to improve her life.

> Around the age of thirty I reached a stage in my life when I realized that all the people in the world are not going to help me as an individual. *I decided I was not going to be hurt anymore.* My husband, my surroundings – all hurt me in different ways. I took a job in a predominantly Catholic area and travelled back and forth. That was a big risk to take but I felt that *if I wouldn't take risks and do this, I would only become a victim and stay a victim.* I knew that I couldn't change all these things by myself. Still, I thought that if each person will do something together it would make a difference. In Northern Ireland we call these politics, politics with a small p.

In her research, Simona Sharoni found that many Palestinian and Israeli-Jewish women activists, when asked about significant turning points in their lives, connect the major events of their lives with crucial political developments in the region. The fact that women do not separate the personal, political, and historical dimensions of their social transformation, she concludes, confirms that, given the centrality of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in their lives, these dimensions are intertwined and indeed inseparable. The women who participated in the workshop told their personal stories of oppression and hardship and noted that these experiences were set in historical and political contexts in which members of certain groups were oppressed.

Personal Pain, National Trauma

Manar is a Palestinian woman from the West Bank and a political activist. At the time of the workshop she was affiliated with a Palestinian university, where she focused on equality and gender issues. She recounted how she became politically active and described three landmarks that shaped and transformed her personal life and political perspective:

> 1967 was the first landmark in my childhood... The Six-Day War took

> place and it was the first time that I saw my father crying. It was for me a big issue. It was the first time that we had a conflict in the house.

Her parents disagreed about whether they should leave for Jordan, where they had family, in order to protect the children, or stay and hold on to their land. She recalls the moment:

> My father called all of the children and asked whether they wanted to stay with him or go with my mother... We can be refugees and live in the refugee camp and we can never tell when we will settle again... He started telling us about the massacres that might happen.

The children faced a tough dilemma. Manar recalls the fear and confusion she felt. In the end, her mother decided to remain with her father and keep the family intact. 'I was wondering what was going on. My father was always talking with his colleagues about Palestine, but I was young, so I started reading.'

The second traumatic event she recalls happened while she was a student at Bir-Zeit University and witnessed the demolition of a friend's house after a violent demonstration against the Israeli occupation. The third landmark, she recounts, was in 1974, when she was a nurse in a hospital in East Jerusalem:

> I was taking care of an old lady who was dying from cancer. She was a very nice-looking lady. She had a Russian passport but in her last days she told me that she really is a Palestinian refugee and that she ran from her village in 1948 when the Israelis occupied Palestinian territories. She told me all about the misery of the '48 war. Hearing her story I felt like I had already heard similar life stories about the occupation and about the deportation of my people by Israeli forces. It was in those days that I decided to dedicate my efforts to the Palestinian cause.

Jackie is a black South African woman from a very poor area in which White oppression was unbearable. She spent most of her life fighting apartheid and experienced persecution due to her political resistance. At the time of the workshop she was working for a House Development Association. She emphasized the connection between the personal and the political:

> When things are turning against us, we sometimes tend to put the blame on ourselves. It is especially women who tend to take the blame on their shoulders. They often don't see the broader political context of their oppression. Yet, *if we, as women, see our personal sufferings as part of our group's oppression, then we can start to invest our energies in the fight for justice.* Connecting between the personal and political could lead more and more women to try and actively improve their lives in different ways. The understanding that the political is embodied in the personal can give strength to fight our misfortunes.

Another participant reinforces this insight:

> I think that we should not separate the personal from the political. In order to change our personal destiny and the bad things that are happening to us, *we have to understand the political nature of our personal oppression.* So we can't separate our personal anxiety from our political anxiety. I think that one of the big mistakes people make is to separate the personal, and you can see it when they say 'it isn't personal' and then do horrible things. I think that one of the lessons I learned here is that behind the political conflicts there are people, mothers and faces. Of course, we all know it from before. But it is a different thing to meet with people, get to know them and learn from them about their experiences of oppression. It is even stronger when you see here that these people are mothers like you, that their only desire is to live in peace.

Having reached a stage in their lives in which they became conscious of the oppression of women, each of these women made a decision to take action to change her personal and social reality.

Strategies of Action

In general, women have developed many and various ways of dealing with stressful situations in conflict areas. Coping strategies are usually chosen individually based on the actual situation which of course changes from one conflict zone to another. Women choose their methods according to available resources and opportunities.

The following two examples, from the experiences of Nagist and Asia (Jewish Israelis), exemplify how mothers can give their daughters a sense of hope and cultivate a space of tenderness and optimism despite the surrounding despair, while teaching them the importance of fighting for one's rights.

Raising Children with Hope and Strength

Nagist was born in Ethiopia and made the long journey to Israel in the early '80s via Sudan. In Sudan, Nagist and her family, together with other Jews, lived in a refugee camp for an extended period of time. Her story is one of religious and racial discrimination, poverty, and the difficulties involved in immigrating and adjusting to a new country.

When they reached Israel the children were taken out of their families, causing personal crises and the breakdown of the traditional family structure.

> Most of the Ethiopian kids who arrived in Israel were taken to boarding schools... My father and mother were left alone, just the two of them, and then the tensions grew and grew. My father was unemployed and it was hard to find something that was suitable for his skills. He got frustrated, and this frustration made him nervous and upset and he felt as if he was losing his status as the protecting father. So, as you can see, *moving to Israel actually broke our family apart.* All of the children learned in boarding schools around the country and our parents stayed alone. Suddenly from a family that was very united, very connected to each other, and very loving, we became a family of only phone calls. It became very hard to

approach my mother and hug her or kiss her or just to touch her.

There are times that I think that the price was too high because I feel that somewhere I have lost my parents... I feel as if I lost fourteen years of knowledge and love and caring that I could have gotten from my mother.

Nagist attributes her coping abilities and her achievements (at the time of the workshop she was studying for a master's degree in education and working in an organization for Ethiopian Jews) to her mother's special way of bringing her up with optimism while teaching her to fight for her rights:

My mother is not educated, but she is a very smart and *special woman*. She is very intelligent *and knows how to encourage us*. I believe that everything I had and will have is because of my mother's strength. She raised us here in Israel all by herself. I remember that she always used to ask us kids: 'what about your homework? Sit down and do it.' Although she did not have any education, she was smart enough to understand the importance of education for our future in Israel. She was always telling us that we have to be independent and strong for ourselves. She used to say, 'if you want something, go and get it! *It is possible. Everything is possible...'*

She taught me to fight for my rights, to fight for my education, to fight for my presence in society, just by speaking and encouraging and telling me to do my homework, even though she was not able to check it herself.

Nagist told the other participants that women have unique qualities that enable them to manage crisis situations in a constructive manner:

We are here as mothers, as sisters, as educators. It is an evident fact that our fathers and brothers are responsible for most of the hardships of the world as they occupy the dominant roles in society. *I feel that as women we can gather more strength* if the opportunity comes. We all went through hard times and radical situations. We all suffered, but I think that all of you proved to me that women have different qualities and abilities that enable us to manage crisis

situations in a different way than men, maybe a better way.

Asia, an Israeli Jew of Polish origin, is a survivor of the Holocaust. Her story portrays the horrendous life conditions in the Jewish ghetto. Her story presents the mother-heroine, struggling against all odds to rescue her child, both physically and emotionally. Asia remembers her mother as a source of infinite support, providing comfort and strength in impossible circumstances. Her story emphasizes the power of women as mothers:

> I look back amazed at the wonderful relations I had with my mother in those horrible times. All my life I am carrying with me the image of my mother as a symbol of motherhood. All my life I am amazed by the role of a mother... Children are afraid all the time... Mothers always know what to do; they know when not to be so afraid. *My mother offered me comfort and consolation in times that despair ruled everywhere. My mother actually saved me in the Holocaust.* She was a hero, *teaching me how to cry silently.*

Discovering one's own Resources

Nadia, an Israeli born in the former Soviet Union, experienced exclusion and discrimination as a Jew in that country before immigrating to Israel at a relatively advanced age. As a new immigrant in Israeli society – once again an outsider – she experienced financial hardship as well as social and cultural difficulties. She is currently active in the Russian immigrant community in Israel and has established several support groups for both the young and the elderly. She described how she dealt with the difficulties of being a new immigrant:

> After experiencing the difficulties of an immigrant working in physical jobs for others, I thought how could I use my talents and profession to improve my life and maybe also help other immigrants? Though I came to Israel at an old age and my Hebrew was poor, I had a profession. *I realized that I have something – my knowledge of English and my teaching skills, which can be of a real use* for other Russian immigrants. I decided to try and give

English lessons for the same price to Russian immigrants. I knew that knowing English could help new immigrants to Israel, especially the younger generation, in integrating and assimilating to the Israeli society that values the knowledge of English.

I came to the conclusion that I must organize some courses, especially for immigrants. I already knew that the situation for immigrants who are older than 45 is grave. Their chances of finding a job without improving their skills are very low. I advertised in a Russian paper that I am looking for English teachers, preferably from the age of 45, to come meet me and talk about their future. I was given a small place in a cultural centre in Jerusalem and we started to spread the rumour that we are giving English lessons for Russian immigrants only for small amounts of money.

At the beginning we had only a few students but after a while more students joined and we grew. Very soon I found sponsors who gave me money every month and so I could pay my teachers a sufficient salary. This was my first project and it was recommended to open a charity fund which enabled me to implement five more projects, all connected to education and immigrants.

Through creative thinking Nadia identified a skill she had that was relevant and needed in her new environment (her knowledge of English and teaching skills) and created a vision and a plan. Her determination allowed her to transform her vision into action and eventually to social involvement, which changed her self-image and her life.

Very often I am asked about my project. 'What makes you do it? You are losing time and your health taking such a heavy task on yourself.' I don't know what to answer, but *the more I think of it the more I am proud of myself.* After all, I am a woman who came to a totally strange place at an old age.

I have established a project that can help people. I walk in the streets with pride in my heart. It is more than any material bonus I could have gotten.

Thinking Constructively

Zahira told the participants how she was able to turn the most difficult experience into a challenge by demonstrating inner strength and optimism:

> I met many Jewish girls who were addicts; some of them committed a murder... I took it as positive from the professional point of view. I said: 'Let me have these girls who are drug addicts or murderers to look into what is their problem.' I started to go out and talk with them. These drug addicts I was counselling them in the jail. I started giving them education about what are drugs, what is the harm of being a drug addict, what you can do as a woman to control it...
>
> I reached a moment that I was the leader, not only for the political prisoners, but also for the non-political prisoners... I stopped being a victim; I am not a victim. I want to be a constructive person and I want to be a professional person with more resources, accept my intellectual resources.

The women participating in the workshop appreciated Zahira's story. *Jackie,* from South Africa, said to her in excitement:

> We might be different people in the eyes of others but remember we are one. Try by all means to impart your knowledge to others, because the world is very wide and people like you are very rare. The struggle has just begun. Use all your zest, because I really believe we are the salt of the earth. *It is up to us to stand together* irrespective of all other factors around us *to liberate each other...* You are not standing alone; you are standing with other people who understand the deep hurt.

Nadia, Helen, and Zahira are women who made a conscious decision to change from passive recipients to active players – taking control of their own lives and moving towards goals of their own choosing. This involves a change of attitude, relinquishing feelings of victimhood and inferiority and replacing them with constructive attitudes and self-assertion.

Community Work and Empowerment

In addition to the personal strategies presented by the participants, social strategies for coping with desperate situations were also discussed. Some of the women have chosen to focus on fighting violence and poverty. They have invested in education and recognized the importance of empowerment of their own people. Others chose to actively resist the oppressor or occupier by joining underground movements and/or participating in armed struggle.

Helen told the participants about her decision to get involved in social activities for the benefit of refugees, noting that this filled her life with hope and enthusiasm:

> I started to work in one of the refugee camps. My role was to work with refugee women from all over former Yugoslavia. I helped conduct a workshop about non-violent communication, counselling, and communication skills. I didn't know anything about that before I started to work in the refugee camp with a group of women. I did video counselling with women who survived the concentration camps in Bosnia. I tried to help women who went through horrible tortures. Since I did not have any specific skills at the beginning, a supervisor instructed me. I felt so much better doing these things.
>
> *I felt useful instead of helpless.* Gradually I became much more self-confident and stronger.
>
> I am so glad for having had the *opportunity to help those women,* but I also feel that *by doing so I really helped myself.* It was really helpful for me to see that the centre has become a kind of a safe place. I did not feel all the hatred between the different nationalities and ethnicities, so common outside. *It was really helpful for me to be in charge of a centre* that gathered women from different ethnicities and taught them how to communicate with each other.
>
> I worked also on a peace-building project and we tried to reconstruct the communication between Serbs and Croats. When I worked with the women's group we tried to reconstruct the communication between different and conflicting nationalities. We

> focused on issues such as health and economic development and tried to figure out how we all survived the insanity of the events. Today I work in a women's centre for education and counselling. We provide some courses for women – computer courses, English language courses – and we try to support women and make them more self-confident. We also assist women from rural areas by teaching them how to work with computers when they are looking for a job. We teach them how to write and read and provide them with some additional education regarding women's health and civil and social rights.

Barry Hart notes the contribution of women's organizations in the former Yugoslavia to healing processes and the transformation of conflict in the region. He describes these organizations as examples of boldness of decision, offsetting the destructive power decisions made by manipulative political entities.

In Northern Ireland, Mary works for a women's organization that supports mothers under stress. Such organizations were pioneers in the development of community work that addresses social needs such as poverty, unemployment, and child welfare. They also addressed the issue of disparities between the Protestant and Catholic communities and helped decrease tension and reduce paramilitary violence. Mari Fitzduff, a professor of conflict studies at the University of Ulster, has acknowledged the role of women in managing diversity and division in Northern Ireland, especially at the community level, where hostility was most often displayed on the streets.

Mary emphasizes the importance of adult education for filling the gaps left by 'the Troubles':

> You get a lot of women in Northern Ireland who missed out on education because of the Troubles. We run courses to get women back into education. We run a young women's group. We try and help young women. They are the next generation and we are trying to give them skills so that they can be more effective.

Education on the Way to Freedom

A prominent strategy mentioned throughout the workshop was enhancing one's education as a path to freedom, based on recognition of the link between sexist exploitation of women in society and the level of their education. The women told how they invested in educational activities such as developing literacy programs, in which illiterate women from all social classes are taught to read and write, in an attempt to endow them with the ability for analytical and critical thinking.

Catherine decided to emphasize education, realizing the power it conveys to repressed people – and especially to women, 'because of the type of life that we may go through.' She told the participants that it was especially important for her to educate her daughter, 'so that when life is tough and the man becomes indifferent, you can bid him farewell with a smile.'

She emphasizes the importance of sharing knowledge:

> Education is not a privilege, it is a must! It is a must not because it makes you know things and be a smarter person but because it gives you hope and power to fight for what is right, for equality of all people.

She described the value of education for improving the conditions of Black people in South Africa. In her view, education is an essential component of the process of rebuilding and reconstruction of society. 'After the formal abolition of the apartheid regime in South Africa,' she said, 'the Black people were still not free.' Their lack of education was an obstacle, both external and internal, to improving their lives.

> A lot of our people are still illiterate; they cannot read or write. It is a problem, just to show you *how far we are from liberating ourselves.* Since we were deprived of education for so many generations, a lot of our people, particularly in rural areas, don't have the basic practical knowledge to build their homes and their basic surroundings. They have no homes. *There is no money and knowledge to put up a proper structure.* They put up mud houses – and when it rains, the mud falls on them. Many people found their

> death because their houses fell on them during the rainy season that we have had in Mozambique, northern Transvaal, Qua Qua, and the Transkei. Many people died because their houses fell on them. They are made of mud bricks. So *until we learn how to make strong bricks our families will still die because of that.*

The liberation of Black people in South Africa, believes Catherine, cannot be achieved simply by putting an end to the apartheid regime. Liberation depends on education of the Black people.

The participants in the workshop acknowledged the important role played by education in their own achievement of awareness and self-realization. They agreed that it was thanks to their education that they realized that their suffering was the result of social processes and that their basic human rights were being violated because of their colour, race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, and gender.

As Catherine put it:

> Education is not only teaching the people some history and how to read and write. It is mainly *teaching them how to stand up and do something for themselves.* It is mainly *showing them that life can be different, that they are able and equal.* As I see it, as a teacher I must give the people motivation and that is much more than just teaching. It is actually delivering the message that no one will feed you for free. You must get up and take what is yours. *Everyone can find within himself or herself the power to do so. They just need a little help.*

Jackie, too, addressed the value of education as giving one hope for a better future.

> The most important thing is the love of education, the love for knowledge and the basic curiosity that each of us has, as human beings. *Education is an important key for self-respect. It makes you realize that you are an equal human being.* We must consider ourselves lucky for going to school and for earning an education, not only for the opportunities opened to an educated person, but

> also for the better understanding and the power it gives you. As a Black woman in a racist society it was my education that enabled me to enter the green pastures of the White man. So my sisters, what I am trying to tell you is that we, and our children, must go through this hard passage of education and overcome all the obstacles that prevent us from reaching the light.

Rupert Taylor sees the essential value of these anti-apartheid NGOs in the projection of a new 'emergent reality' – namely, a virtual non-racial democratic South Africa. Not only did the organizations provide services to the poor and oppressed; they also projected and created a non-racial democratic future as well. They provided places of empowerment and places for clarifying the thought of many people, both Blacks and Whites, a forum in which Black people could express themselves without fear. Many people found a new sense of solidarity and fraternity in these organizations. Taylor suggests that this alternative way of thinking and acting enabled activists to comprehend their social world outside the warped logic of apartheid. He cites Nichola Haysom, who said, 'being a member of the broad non-racial struggle you lose your colour.'

Literacy for Political Action

Charlotte Bunch wrote about the political importance of literacy in her essay 'Feminism and Education':

> *Reading and writing* are valuable in and of themselves, and women should have access to their pleasure. Beyond that, they *are vital to change* for several reasons. First, they provide a means of conveying ideas and information that may not be readily available in the popular media... Second, reading and writing help develop an individual's imagination and ability to think... Third, an individual's access, through reading a variety of interpretations of reality, increases that person's capacity to think for herself, to go against the norms of the culture, and to conceive of alternatives for society – all of which are *fundamental to acting politically*. Fourth, reading and writing aid each woman's individual survival and success in the

world, by increasing her ability to function in her chosen endeavours.

Bunch encourages women to accept the challenge of education – whether reading and writing skills or the development of critical and analytical skills – and to think systematically about the world.

> Our society trains only a few people to think in this manner, mostly those from the classes it expects to control the social order. Certainly most women are not expected to take control, and, in consequence, are not encouraged to think analytically. In fact, critical thinking is the antithesis of woman's traditional role. Women are supposed to worry about mundane survival problems... We are not meant *to think analytically about society,* to question the way things are, or to consider how things could be different. *Such thinking involves an active, not a passive, relationship to the world.* It requires confidence that your thoughts are worth pursing and that you can make a difference.

Fighting for Independence

Another strategy to change an oppressive situation, described by these women, is the attempt to eliminate an aggressor or occupier. This may entail the use of force and violence to achieve independence.

Some of the participants chose strategies of active resistance. Lina, Jackie, and Catherine, the South Africans, were involved in underground resistance activities aimed at achieving human rights for Black people in their country. They were determined to resist the discrimination against Blacks in South Africa.

To quote Lina:

> In 1974 *I realized that political activism is the only route open for oppressed people to try and change their situation.* I was a teacher at that time. One day one of the little girls in my class came to me and told me that she was brutally raped. Having experienced rape at an early age myself, I was furious. The case was silenced at school. Together with the girl's parents I organized a demonstration

and from that moment on I was labelled a troublemaker by the White authorities...

A short while later I got more and more involved in *political resistance against the apartheid regime*. I paid a heavy price for my political activity. I was in and out of detention and under constant surveillance. Yet I do not regret any of my actions in those days. On the contrary, *the more they tried to break me the stronger I became.*

Jackie, too, was involved in the Black liberation struggle in South Africa. She told how she reached the decision to get involved in it.

In 1976 *I realized that I have no way but to join an active fight for the future of our next generation*. So I joined the M.K. (the military wing of the African National Congress), which was considered by the White regime to be a terrorist organisation. Actually I had three jobs: I was a single mother and had to take care of my home and children. I was a nurse in a hospital and an activist in the resistance. It was my job as a nurse that gave me the real drive to fight apartheid. I saw horrible things as a nurse. I think the worst was the separation of the White and Black dead bodies at the morgue. *Apartheid, I realized, was active even in our death*. Even death could not release the Black people from being discriminated against. *I realized I had to act in order to change it...*

I was still working as a nurse in a private practice from 7:00 A.M. to 4:30 P.M. every day, rushing home to fulfil my duties as a mother. And then, when it got dark, I used to cross the border and come back at around 3:00 A.M.

For smuggling refugees and weapons across the border she served a prison term in solitary confinement.

Rupert Taylor writes about the immense obstacles that confronted those pursuing peaceful change. The South African situation was viewed as a zero-sum conflict between Blacks and Whites, between African and Afrikaner nationalism, so that the use of force was perceived as inevitable.

Jackie's strategy of armed resistance took over her life. She even involved her children in her fight for justice and eventually paid a devastating price – losing her son.

> My role in the M.K. was to infiltrate children across the border so they could get to a safe place. I even recruited my own children to the mission. On one of his missions, my son was killed in a shootout. Having heard the bitter news, I got stronger in my political views. Although the White authorities prevented me from paying a last respect to my son, I nevertheless kept on fighting and did not surrender.'

Breaking the Silence by Challenging National Policy

Another type of strategy is organizing dissent against occupation and/or oppression, speaking out and making the female voice heard.

In recent years, Israeli women have begun challenging the marginal and passive role to which society has relegated them. Groups have organized to advance clear positions against national and military policy, offering opportunities for women to step out of their socially assigned and politically peripheral roles. These women have voiced strong protest against the Israeli occupation and the violence used by Israeli soldiers against Palestinian civilians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

In the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, women's organizations in Israel have begun to document instances of torture and sexual abuse experienced by Palestinian women. In Simona Sharoni's words, 'the dehumanization of both Palestinians and women by Israeli soldiers legitimizes the discrimination, the humiliation, and the oppression and violence inflicted daily upon them.' She goes on to analyze the links between violence against Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and the steep increase in violence against Israeli women on the home front:

> There is a strong connection between violence against women and violence in the occupied territories. A soldier who serves in the West

> Bank and Gaza Strip and learns that it is permissible to use violence against other people is likely to bring violence back with him upon his return to his community. This has direct implications for our lives as women.

When their opinions are not heard in decision-making forums, women have to find alternative channels. The message of their demonstrations is that the violent behaviour of the Israeli army against Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip are part of the culture of unchallenged sexism, violence, and oppression that women face.

This breaking of the silence created a public debate about the legitimacy of war. These women use their status as mothers of soldiers to challenge national policy and myths. The voices that resonated the most were those of mothers who had lost sons in battle.

The coping strategies described above relate to different circles in life in which one can have influence:

The first circle is *the family* – what a woman can do to cope with hardship in her immediate sphere. Here the focus is on her emotional state and how she raises her children. She may transform her attitude from despair and hopelessness to a constructive state of mind. She may teach her children to fight for their rights while cultivating hope and optimism.

The second circle is *the community*. Within this sphere women are active in assisting others in need and working for the benefit of their community. This active involvement may enhance social change as well as individual change (by strengthening one's self-confidence and self-image).

The third circle is the national circle or *society at large*. This involves political activism on various levels, including speaking out, active resistance to an oppressive system, and drastic (and sometimes violent) measures. In this sphere women aspire to change political realities, transform conflicts (bring wars to an end), and engage in peace-building processes.

Women and Social Change

One of the participants in the workshop concluded as follows:

> I think that *we women have different qualities of power than men.* I think that this power comes from the fact of motherhood, of being able to grant life and the very, I would dare to say, natural responsibility that we have towards our family. I don't say that fathers lack love for their families, but with women it is different. I think that caring and loving at all costs gives you power. I don't know all the details of the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis, but I do think that this type of *loving, caring and the empathy for another human being* is certainly missing there.

Manar agreed:

> I think that my courage comes from the fact that I am a woman. Men hold the powerful roles in our society. But the fact that I am a woman gives me strength. In some funny way, *my womanhood opens for me doors to other people.* I think that this is the whole idea of the workshop. Let me ask you this simple thing: do you think that men could have discussed so openly and full-heartedly their life stories with other men whom they may be still considering as enemies? I am not so sure.

Voices of Care, Voices of Justice

Research in various fields has characterized feminine values as reflecting an emphasis on relationships, a moral focus on care and responsibility (rather than on rights and rules), and empathy for the position of the other. Psychologist Nancy Chodorow suggests that the female self is predominately relational in its orientation. She explained this preoccupation with relationship as derived from women's traditional responsibility for early childcare. Chodorow also maintained that because girls derive their sense of identity formation through the experience of attachment rather than separation (unlike

boys, who must separate from the mother and identify with the father), empathy becomes central to their definition of self in a way not typical of boys. The female emphasis on connection rather than separation creates an orientation toward care and responsibilities rather than toward rights and rules.

This morality system has been termed the 'voice of care' (in contrast to the 'voice of justice'). It gives priority to maintaining relationships. Unlike the 'voice of justice,' where decision-making is according to rules and the conception of self is individualistic, its conception of the self, stemming from the female experience and way of thinking, is social.

Carol Gilligan, who first raised the issue of women's distinct frames of thinking, suggests that female judgements are different from male judgements, reflecting an 'ethic of care' opposed to the logic of justice. Women believe in the restorative activity of care, says Gilligan. They tend to emphasize relationships, sustaining them by communication, and act to include people by strengthening, rather than severing, connections.

The women who participated in the workshop demonstrated both the ethic of care and the ethic of justice. They resisted oppression and fought for equality. At the same time they were nurturing and mediated their conflicts through communication within relationships.

An Engaged Vision

As Nadia put it:

> It is all over the world. You see the violence; you see the animosity between people. There is hatred that leads to bloodshed and aggression. *Most of these things happen because we play the roles that society intends for us;* a man has to fight, he is a hero. The woman has to sit down and support him; but if we *stand up and demand that the roles change we could set things differently. Maybe if women would run things, with more empathy and sensitivity, the misery in the world would be reduced.*

Nadia's words are part of a revolutionary discourse about women's capacity

to construct a better society, based on their heightened sensitivity to exploitation and unequal power, which goes beyond men's abuse of women. She expresses a political ambition to generalize the values of caring (which, for historical reasons, are inextricably bound up with the lives and values of women) to society at large. Sociologist Sara Ruddick and other feminist theorists believe that women, drawing on their maternal experience, can create conditions of respect for difference and variety among and within people and societies.

In societies in transition, women can play important roles in moving from a violent conflict to the construction or reconstruction of civil society. Mari Fitzduff, in her book *Beyond Violence*, acknowledges the contribution of women in Northern Ireland who crossed community lines to the development of new models of dialogue and cooperation and their assistance to community leaders in transcending their particularistic perspectives. As we heard from the participants in the workshop, they are engaged in social activities that contribute to the development of civil society in their homes, help diminish divided structures, and create better understanding between adversaries. Through the women's organizations in which they are active they strive to establish and advance democratic values within their societies and thus the foundations of democratic civil societies marked by less exploitation and disparities of power.

Promoting Reconciliation

Resistance is the art of discerning and then having the courage to fight violence, writes Sara Ruddick. The challenge is to recognize when fighting is no longer justified but is motivated by vengeance or inertia. She suggests that some women are more adept at resisting and others at peacekeeping. Once the battle is won, people who have been abused must forgive – which is often confusing and morally controversial.

In societies faced with the task of reconstruction, the importance of forgiveness and reconciliation cannot be overemphasized. Some of the participants stressed the importance of promoting reconciliation between different groups and exemplified how women can overcome barriers and bring former

enemies closer, through forgiveness and reconciliation. Ruddick advances the concept of responsible reconciliation and asserts that taking responsibility comes fairly easily to mothers. Mothers are experts in making amends and subduing rivalries in the interest of the active connectedness that is 'peace.' Mothers create arrangements that enable their children to live safely, develop happily, and act conscientiously. They are committed to the values and survival of their community and people.

Summary

At the end of the workshop, the women expressed their personal impressions and appreciation of the event that had brought them together. They spoke about the emotional experience of sharing their accounts of personal pain and collective trauma. They acknowledged the value of recounting their experiences, of being heard by and listening to others. They reported feeling empowered by this experience and enlightened by the others' coping strategies. As one of the participants said:

> For me this workshop was a good example, a good experience to understand what women's power means. Coming here I had this thought that my story is personal. But then I heard all your stories and understood that my power, my personal private power, is something I share with other women.
>
> I have looked at all of you and I have been asking myself, how come you are all so smiley? You all seem so optimistic, and I have gained a lot of power just from meeting all of you. Now I understand... *When times are hard sometimes all you have is yourself, your smile.* Sometimes we don't know where to get it from but we have it. You can't believe how much power we have...
>
> The stories give me hope and strength, because they tell me that from the most difficult conditions a beautiful flower can bloom...
>
> You all gave me power. Thank you.

In her book, *Trauma and Recovery,* Judith Lewis-Herman writes that storytelling is a form of ritual testimony that has healing powers. Testimony, according to Lewis-Herman, has both a private, spiritual dimension and a public, political dimension. She suggests that in the telling, the story is no longer an account of shame and humiliation (for the storyteller) but of dignity and virtue. After recounting their tales of pain and terror, the women who participated in the workshop received acknowledgement and appreciation from their listeners, who saw them as courageous exemplars of moral power, committed to

rebuilding their lives and communities.

The workshop contributed to the personal empowerment of the participants, who recognized their own remarkable achievements and gained inspiration to continue their endeavours. In addition, it revealed the strength and support that women can gain by working together and building coalitions across conflicts. As another participant said:

> I am very thankful to all of you here, because I saw so many heroic women who are doing a lot to make life better... For everybody it seems that her stress and her life is the worst and that she is oppressed (by somebody). But all of us struggle in one field or another, and it is courageous. To me it gives courage to continue my struggle...
>
> I want to say that I am with everybody here... All of those who are present here are my real friends. I will think about all of you. I will remember all this. Your faces will be before my face, and I will always pray for the good and happiness of all of you.

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