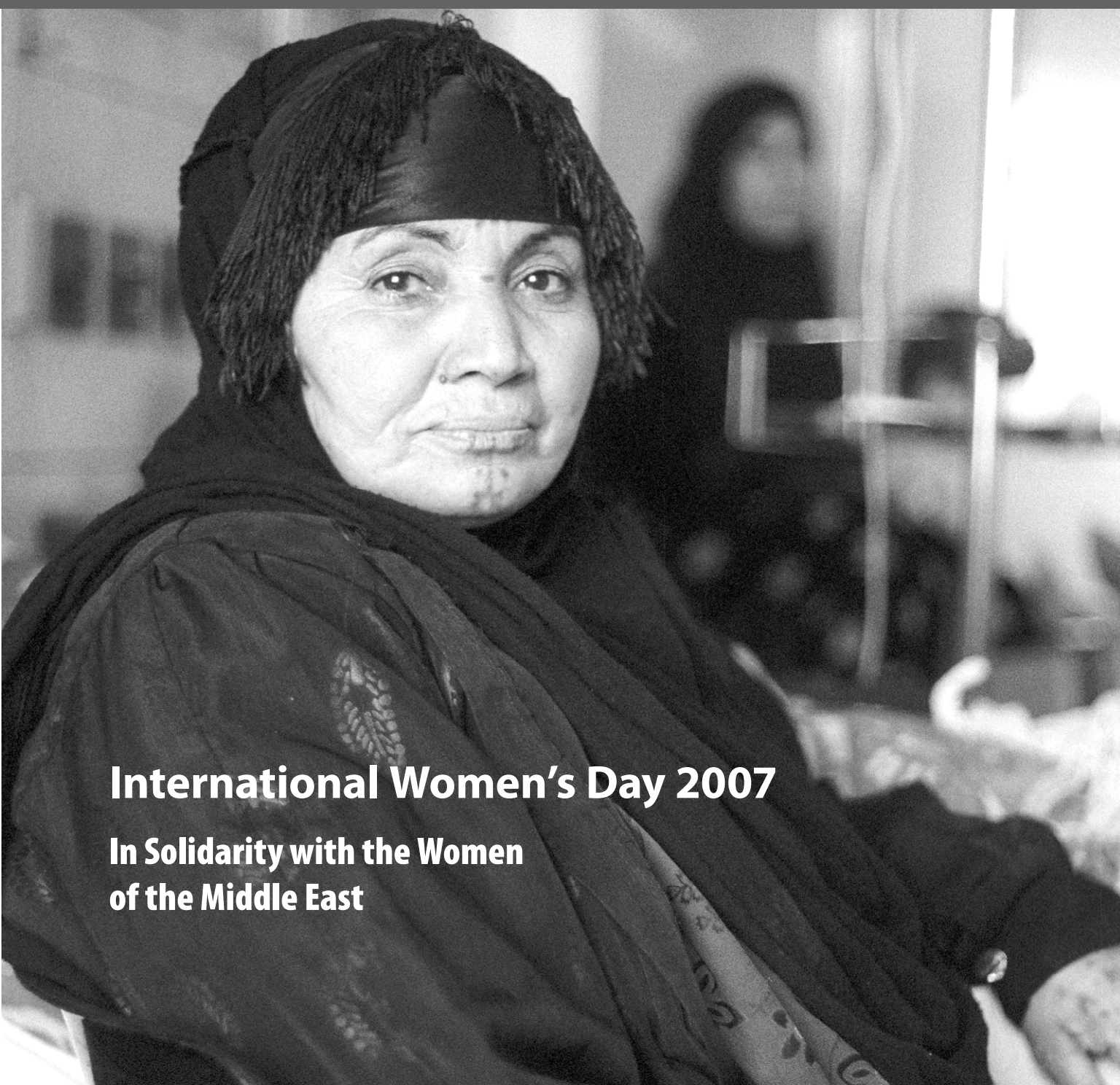




Magazine of the Socialist Party USA

# *The* **Socialist**

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**International Women's Day 2007**

**In Solidarity with the Women  
of the Middle East**



## About this issue...

The articles in this International Women's Day issue of *The Socialist* honor that holiday by speaking eloquently to its central themes: empowerment, resistance, and celebration. In her or his own way, each writer is giving voice to people's desire and ability to pursue individual and collective rights and responsibilities unfettered by tyrannical systems and personages. Over the past few years, the courage and strength of the women of Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Lebanon, and Palestine--in the face of on-going atrocities committed against them by the U.S. and its allies--have deeply inspired us, and moved us to action.

Therefore, we dedicate this issue to the Children of Afghanistan

Hope Project, Iran's Organization of Women's Liberation, the Global Women's History Project, the Iraqi Children's Art Exchange Project, the progressive wing of Hezbollah, the Israeli and Palestinian members of the Coalition of Women for Peace, and all those individuals (like writers Irene Elmerot, Steve Rossignol, and David Schaich) who are trying to make sense of current conditions and institutions in order to change them. They truly embody the history and vision of International Women's Day.

This March 8, let's once again take to the streets to celebrate our bravery, resolve, and joyousness in the face of adversity. Happy International Women's Day 2007!

### About the cover ...

An Iraqi grandmother sits in a hospital room with her grandson who is receiving cancer treatments.

The photograph was taken by Claudia Lefko, who, on a humanitarian mission to Iraq, took artwork and art supplies to children in a Baghdad hospital. This simple act blossomed into the Iraqi Children's Art Exchange Project, an international artwork exchange between American and Iraqi children.

In the article, "Images of Iraq" (p. 6), Lefko describes the project's evolution and some of the women and children she's met through her work.

## Correction

*An article entitled "Self-Determination or Assimilation: The Future of Chicanos, Mexicanos, and Our Party in the United States" appeared in the last issue. The following letter is from the author.*

I would like to thank the Editorial Board and all involved for printing my article on immigration. In the editorial process, I missed some minor changes that could confuse the reader. The article currently reads:

"The generation at the core of the Chicano movement descended from immigrants who arrived in the early 20th Century, before the Treaty of Guadalupe, Mexico."

The original read as follows:

"The generation that made up the core of the Chicano movement was made up of the decedents of pre Treaty of Guadalupe Mexico and extensive immigration to the United States during the earlier part of the twentieth century."

In another passage it reads:

"The objectives of many in the Chicano movement were self-determination and the internal colonization of the Southwest region of the United States--Aztlán--where Mexicans were the majority."

The original read like this:

"Many in the Chicano movement struggled from a point of view of internal colonization and the objective of self determination for the Southwest region of the United States, where Mexicans were the majority (Aztlán)."

These are minor factors, but they are important in establishing a time line and identifying key issues in the Chicano movement.

As a clarification, the concept of internal colonization is based on the idea that the American southwest, obtained as the results of the Mexican-American war, was an internal colony of the United States.

Todo el Poder al Pueblo!

*Raul Cano*

## THE SOCIALIST

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*The Socialist* is always looking for interesting, insightful, well-written material. In particular, we are looking for work that highlights the struggles and triumphs of the working class. We will accept news articles and stories about organizing and protests, but we are also looking for short fiction, poetry, and music/arts/theater/film review. Please mark all letters to the editor as such and limit letters to 250 words; articles should not exceed 2,500 words. Submit as e-mail attachments in Microsoft Word .doc or .rtf format to SocialistParty@sp-usa.org, or by mail to: The Socialist, 339 Lafayette St. Room 303, New York, NY 10012.

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# Underneath the Veil of Freedom: A Democratic Socialist Feminist Perspective on the Middle East

Editorial

As usual, the United States government has been hugely hypocritical in its post-9/11 policies. While claiming that they were securing women's rights around the world by liberating countries from tyrannical regimes, those in power have been systematically taking away the rights of women in the U.S., including reproductive rights. Clearly, we are feeling the effects of fundamentalism on our shores as well.

After 9/11, the "war on terror" was launched in Afghanistan, due to its ties with Osama bin Laden and al Qaida. The other rationale for the invasion was to liberate Afghan women. However, four years later Afghanistan is as unstable as ever, with warlords running rampant, and with religious fundamentalism re-trenched. Although some positive changes are in evidence, such as women being able to go to school and work again, these advances are confined to only certain parts of the country. In some areas where girls' education does exist, parents are afraid to allow their daughters to take advantage of it following the burning down of several girls' schools. Girls have been abducted on the way to school and sexual assaults on children of both sexes are now commonplace, according to Human Rights Watch. Unfortunately, many of the conservative allies and groups who are working with U.S. forces continue to oppose women's full and equal participation in society. The murder and rape of women abound, and attacks on women's rights continue. The lives of the women of Afghanistan are limited and insecure. Women are committing suicide because of their increased marginalization: sadly, even more so than under Taliban rule.

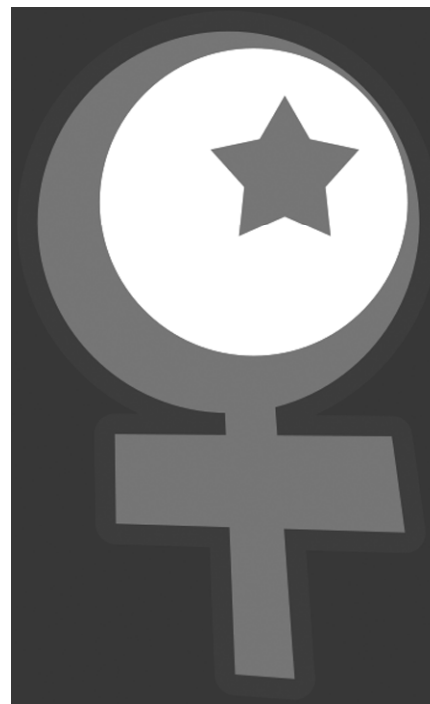
Since the U.S. invasion of Iraq in March, 2003, this situation for women is being replicated in the Middle East. Iraq, which was a secular society with many rights for women under Saddam, is now a much more hostile place for women under Islamic rule. The U.S. has allied itself with Islamic fundamentalism rather than a secular state. The U.S. government has decided that freedom for American corporate interests cannot wait, but that women's rights can. Iraq is now in a civil war and the consequences of this situation for women are grave. Women and their families are experiencing tremendous amounts of violence, including torture and murder. Many families are now fleeing Iraq as refugees, but the vast majority of women remain in an extremely tumultuous and oppressive society. So what do we do to stop this madness?

As democratic socialist feminists, our goal for the Middle East, as for all the societies of the world, is the complete separation of religion and state. For this to occur, there will need to be a reformation of all fundamentalist interpretations of faith, along with a mass movement for systemic changes in political, social, and economic structures. In the case of Islam, such a reformation would mean that the literalist interpretation of the Qur'an would start to fall out of favor as the faith moderates, a precondition for the development of a secular state.

To usher in this movement we must support an end to misogyny within the Middle East and a break with past beliefs and practices that men have held about women. The issues of poor housing, job prospects, and public services in Islamic countries must also be addressed. Lack

of resources fuels fundamentalism. We must support democratic socialist principles for the Middle East as well as here in the United States. The "war on terror" has brought a lot of harm to the Middle East and has stoked the fires of religious fundamentalism. We must work to bring this so-called "war"--one that has caused many real wars--to an end.

Ultimately, only secular governments can bring stability and women's rights to the Middle East. As long as religion and law are intertwined, the rights women deserve can be denied to them continuously. Hope lies in the power of women's movements around the world to free themselves from the bonds of patriarchy, fueled by fundamentalism, and hidden underneath the veil of freedom. ●



*A symbol of Islamic feminism, incorporating the Crescent and Moon of Islam with the female symbol.*

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# Mass Resistance is the Other Side of Large Scale Oppression: The Reality of Women's Liberation in Iran

by Azar Majedi

In describing women's conditions in a particular country, one either refers to laws governing that country or statistics. In this manner, one either exposes the extent of the oppression women suffer, or admires their achievements. As regards women living under the rule of Islam, it is pure discrimination and oppression, subjugation and state violence. If women are considered second-class citizens in many countries, in Islam-ridden countries they are not even considered as citizens. They are extensions of men. In fact, according to Islam, the concept of citizen is non-existent. There is a relation between God and religious hierarchy and a collective of consciousnessless men, with women as their slaves. As a matter of fact this is true about any other religion. However, this is beside our discussion today.

You have heard a great deal about women under Islam: Islam a la Taliban, in Pakistan, in Bangladesh, Somalia, Sudan, and Iran under the Islamic Republic. The downtrodden situation of women, sheer discrimination, gender apartheid, Islamic veil, forced marriages, officially recognized pedophilia (by setting the legal age of marriage at nine for girls), honor killing, polygamy, stoning women to death for engaging in sex outside marriage, encouraging men to hit their wives for punishment. The list is long.

If once the issue of Islam and women was an unknown topic, nowadays, thanks to the rise of political Islam, Islamic states in Iran, Afghanistan, and now in Iraq, it has become a well-known topic. I am sure that you all have heard about the non-existence of women's rights in Islam. However, some think it is not Islam's fault, they blame the patriarchy. They maintain that it is not Islam, but patriarchal interpretations of Islam that is responsible for the conditions of women in countries under the rule of Islam.

In other words it is the ruling men's fault not the ruling Islam. We will not get into the debate that Islam as with all other religions is the direct product of the patriarchal era. It could not have escaped being permeated by patriarchal values and outlook. However, we must state one undeniable fact, that is, millions of women are violated daily by Islamic laws, customs, values and states. We must deal in an effective manner with this violation.

I am here on behalf of the Organization for Women's Liberation. I am here to familiarize you with realities of Iranian society. You have heard about Iran. I do not mean the oil, or the nuclear project. I do not mean the mullahs or the fatwa against Salman Rushdie. I mean the situation of women. Today, I want to talk to you about women's resistance, rather than women's oppression. You have heard long tales about women's oppression. I like to tell you that there is a mass resistance movement against this systematic oppression, this official misogynic ideology. I would like to break this encouraging news to you that Iran is the birthplace of a very important historic moment in the international women's liberation movement, a movement more significant than the Suffragette movement and more vast than the women's liberation movement in the Soviet Union during 1917-1930, or in the West during the '60's and '70's. I am here to ask for your solidarity and support. This movement has great potential.

If it materializes, it is capable of not only liberating women in Iran, but also opening up the door to freedom to all women in the Middle East. We must recognize this fact.

The situation in Iran is different from that in Afghanistan, Iraq, or

Sudan. There is mass discontentment in these countries. There is resistance, but there is a lack of a mass movement in defense of women's rights. Such a movement exists in Iran.

In Iran there has never existed a secular state, the separation of religion from the state, or education. The laws have always been religious laws. Dictatorship has always existed. The efforts to reform family law in favor of women during the 60s were very meager and not very effective. During the 1979 revolution a women's right movement was born. This was not a mass movement, but rather formed by left and intellectual women. I am from that generation. My struggle for women's rights and for freedom and equality goes further than that period.

The Islamic Republic attacked women full-force after coming to power. The first phase of the women's movement was short-lived. It put up a brave resistance but it was silenced after two years. Women's resistance continued in individualistic fashion, against the veil, gender apartheid, and obligatory dress code. Many women have been imprisoned, tortured, or stoned to death. This brutal oppression was not able to obliterate the spirit of resistance. The new generation re-ignited this movement in mass scale and pushed it forward. Fighting against the Islamic veil and apartheid is one of the main battlegrounds.

When I hear the apologists of the Islamic movement or the defenders of cultural relativism (which, thanks to our relentless struggle, has become a marginal tendency) say: "the Islamic veil and apartheid is their culture", I get furious and want to laugh at the same time. If this is "their culture" then it is sup-

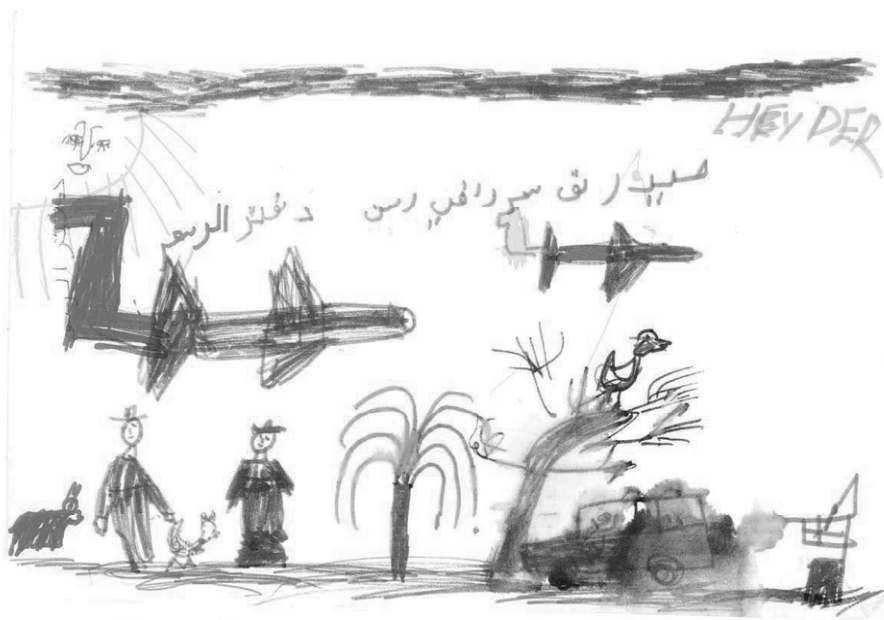
*Mass Resistance, continued on p. 21*

# Images of Iraq

by Claudia Lefko

A few years ago, *National Geographic* produced an issue on Africa and for the first time, there was no photograph on the front cover; it was an historic first for the magazine. What image would they pick, asked the editor, to represent such a vast and diverse continent. What an exciting and provocative gesture, I said to myself, in complete agreement. Intellectually I was right there; but it has taken me years to actualize that notion in my own work.

I have been coordinating an art exchange project between Iraqi and American children since 2001; I use the art and documenting photographs to develop positive relationships between children--across language, culture and politics. I use my ever-expanding collection to create exhibits that help to keep Iraq and Iraqis in the world community--folded into the family of nations.



The exhibits have been on display in universities, public libraries, galleries, conferences, and hospitals from New Jersey to Nova Scotia.

The project began in 2001 when I joined an international delegation bringing medicines to hospitals -- struggling under the weight of the US supported UN Sanctions--in

Iraq. I organized the art exchange project as a more personal gesture for children. Yes, they need medicines, food, clothing and shelter, love and protection. But, as any teacher, parent or child psychologist will tell you, they also need opportunities to explore, discover, create and dream--it is a critical part of child development. So I invited children in my community to make pictures for me to take to Iraq; I bought art supplies: crayons, markers and paper, and headed to Baghdad.

I was extremely fortunate to find support for the project there; one of the government "minders" at the hotel--part of the huge bureaucracy under Saddam Hussein--assigned me a driver, allowed me to leave the delegation, and arranged for me and a colleague to meet with the hospital staff on the children's cancer ward at Al-Mansour Pediatric Hospital. The doctors and nurse immediately saw the value and agreed to the project; we could visit the ward to take photographs and distribute the artwork and supplies we had brought with us. They would serve as our interpreters over the next few weeks, as we went



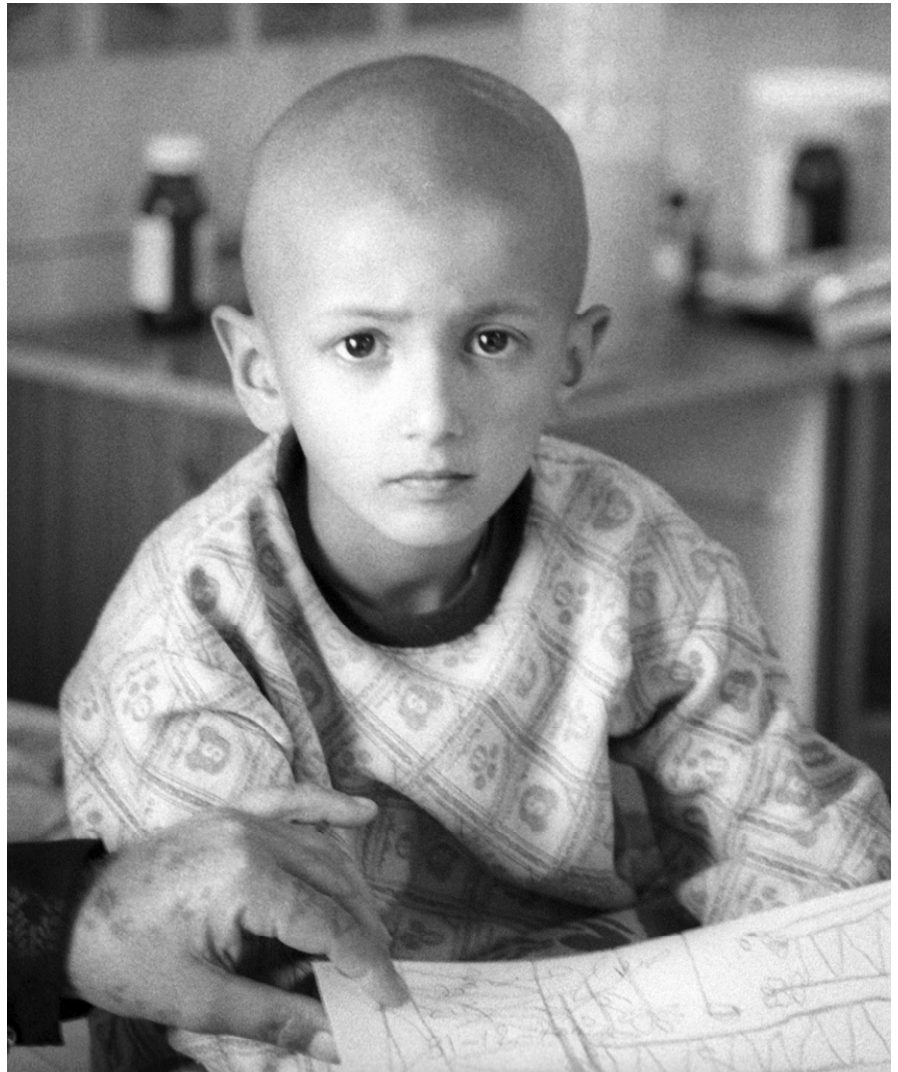
from bed to bed, meeting the children and talking with the mothers or grandmothers who were required to stay with them.

I traveled back to Baghdad for three weeks in mid-December, 2003, and January of 2004; I met with the same doctor and nurse on the same ward. This was phase two: Iraq under occupation. My most recent exchange trip was Fall 2006, when, unable to go to Baghdad because of the violence and chaos of the occupation, I traveled instead to Amman, Jordan, where I met with Iraqi families who had fled the country. Phase three: Life in Exile.

I have been a teacher and children's advocate for nearly thirty years. I am not an artist, or an art curator; I am not a photographer or academic immersed in the field of communication, popular culture, or images. As my project expanded beyond the initial trip, and the one exhibit I had expected to pull together, I found myself in unfamiliar territory, in the vast and wide ranging field and literature of images. I became more and more conscious of their power, and more and more aware of the power of the one who controls them. With this increasing awareness, came an increased feeling of responsibility for my role as the one choosing the images of Iraq and Iraqis that would be displayed.

I am not Iraqi; I'm an outsider determining, to some extent what is important to show and tell--even what to hold onto--about Iraq. This isn't to say I've operated in a vacuum. The work is strongly influenced by--most especially--Dr. Salma, Rasmiya the nurse, and the children and mothers on that hospital ward.

In a sense, they said, "Yes, come in. Please, take our photograph, and here is our art, our message to you and your country." So, the photograph of a grandmother, overcome



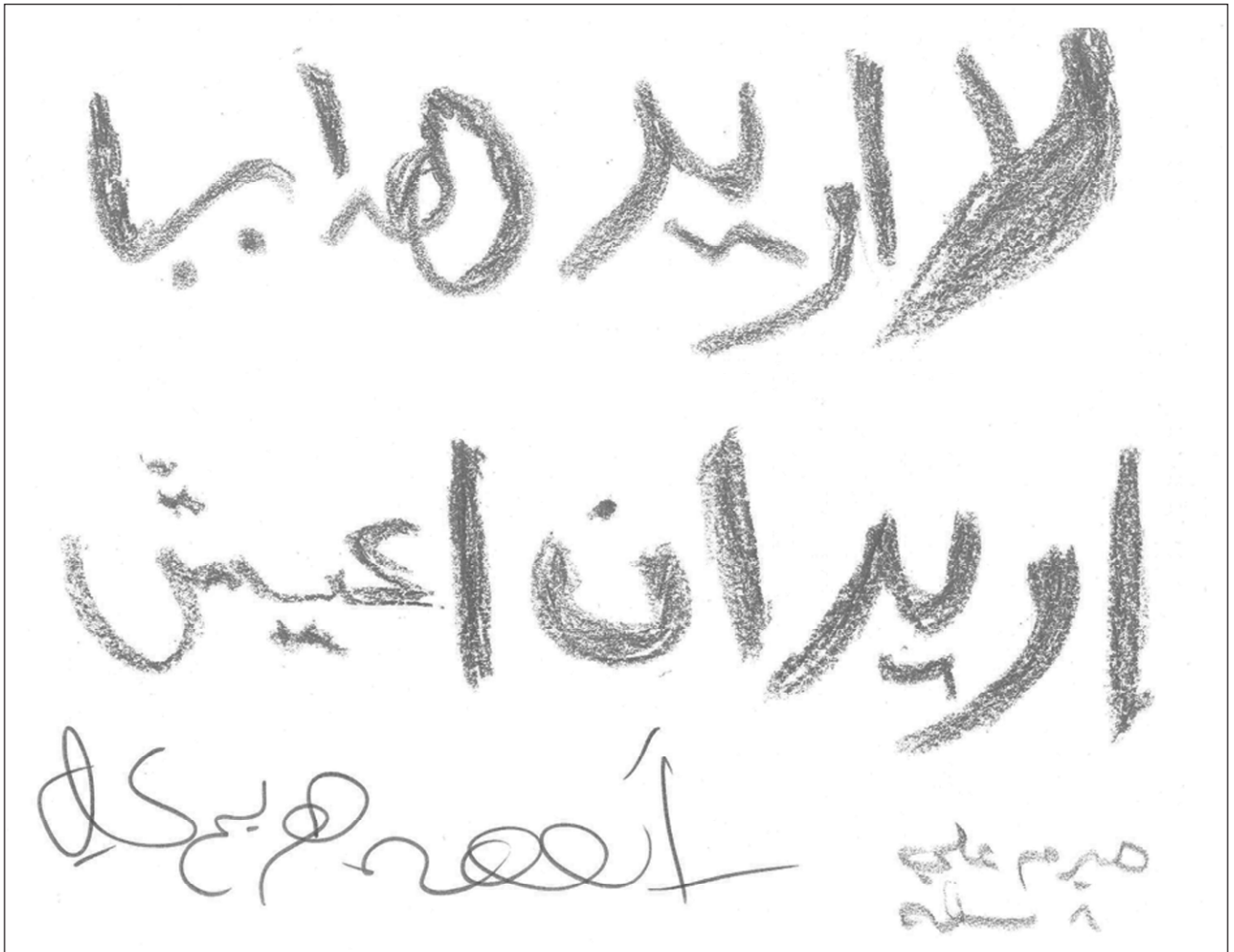
*Grandson of the woman who appears on the cover of this issue. In this photo, her hand is seen reaching for her grandson's artwork.*

with grief as she sat, moaning by the bed of her dying grandchild is often part of an exhibit. I wanted to pass her by, but she insisted I take note of what was happening, and mark that painful moment. And, the picture, drawn in 2001 by eight-year-old Heerum Ali. Using a bright orange crayon, he filled his paper with beautiful Arabic script, "I don't want presents. I want to live," he wrote. Having entered their world, I feel an enormous obligation to give visibility to these people and voice to these sentiments. My country of

***Images, continued on p. 8***

*Right--A weeping grandmother cradles her dying grandchild.*





"I don't want presents. I want to live."

origin, and the limited scope of my project, on some level, seems irrelevant in these circumstances.

Nonetheless I recognize and feel the need for cultural grounding--for collaboration. I've actively sought out partners--people from Iraq or the Middle East-- for advice and comment on my images: for information, consultation, and cultural insights. Why do you only take pictures of veiled women? asks one Iraqi friend who I meet in Amman; an artist and feminist, she is unveiled, as-- historically-- are most Iraqi women. She is right about the women in my photographs, I tell her, but those were the only women at the hospital;

they were all veiled. Only the doctor and the nurse were not. It was the same with the women and children I encountered at the refugee camp. I didn't seek out a particular group of people to present. I took what I was presented with. Nonetheless her question was a useful provocation, and made me think, again, about what and who to photograph in Jordan, where the Iraqi women I met were evenly split between the veil and not.

This project, which has become my work, is both exciting and challenging. While the political landscape shifts and churns, the narrative, from a humanitarian point of view,

is of an ongoing tragedy for Iraqis. It is unchanged, in my opinion, or worse. For all the questions that arise from broader collaboration, there is, I think, a corresponding sense--both visually and intellectually-- of more solid ground underneath the project. Like National Geographic, I think of the cover--if this were a book-- as blank. This keeps me honest and open to new information and ideas.

*Claudia Lefko is a long-time educator and advocate for young children and their families. Founder and coordinator of the Iraqi Children's Art Exchange Project, she can be reached at [www.iraqichildrensart.org](http://www.iraqichildrensart.org).* ●



# Women of Iraq and Iran: Visionaries for Peace in the Twenty-First Century

by Elise G. Young

It is impossible to analyze historic or current developments without understanding how “gender” figures in all aspects of what we call history. This analysis includes many discussions: socialization of “male” and “female”; patriarchy as it is expressed in social, economic, political terms; race as a gendered construct. I approach this subject matter as a Middle East historian, activist, and co-founder and Director of The Global Women’s History Project at Westfield State College (Westfield, Massachusetts) where I am an Associate Professor in the History Department.

The goals of the GWHP are to educate our students about the groundbreaking work that women are doing in the Middle East, Africa, and Southeast Asia in the service of peace with justice, and to provide a setting for discussion of the critical issue of gender as it is being lived by women and men in our times. We believe in research on the ground: that is, we believe in bringing together women working in grassroots organizations from war torn regions and from the U.S. (including war torn regions of the U.S.) in order to learn from one another and in order to strategize together and create on-going links. Through this process we are creating an archive of women’s history that would otherwise be invisible, ignored, misrepresented, and suppressed.

In the twentieth century, women in the region that has become the modern nation states of Iraq and Iran were confronted with a particular set of internal and geo-political developments resulting in intense social upheaval. When the war between Iraq and Iran ended (1980-1988), more than a million people had died on both sides, the resources of both countries were depleted and the lives of women of both regions had been severely disrupted. Military coups, the Gulf War, United Nations sanctions against Iraq, the current war and occupation in Iraq, the U.S.

campaign against Iran in regard to nuclear arms, all have contributed to instability in the region with devastating consequences for women.

Appropriation of land and resources of the Middle East has a long history, culminating in the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire after the first world war and the creation of mandates controlled by the French and the British. British control of the provinces of Basra, Baghdad, and Mosul, which were later constituted as the modern nation state of Iraq, grew out of strategic interests and interest in the resource of oil in Iraq as early as 1916/17.

The current occupation and war in Iraq is a continuation of that historical legacy. Yanar Mohammad grapples daily with the consequences of women’s resistance to this occupation, as well as women’s affiliations with male dominated power groups. She is in the forefront of publicizing the abuse of women by the politics of male rule whether it be tribal law,

Islamist groups defending misogynist agendas, or the U.S. military defending their misogynist (cloaked as liberatory) agendas.

An accomplished artist and architect who graduated from the University of Baghdad, Yanar fled from Iraq to Canada in 1993 with her infant son, where she created the organization, Defense of Iraqi Women’s Rights. Although her life was threatened she returned to Iraq to help women after the U.S. invasion. In 2004 her organization became the Organization of Women’s Freedom in Iraq (OWFI), and set up shelters for women in Baghdad and Kirkuk. Yanar is Editor in Chief of their newspaper, *Equality*.

Yanar gave a keynote speech at our Global Women’s History Project Conference in April, 2005, and also gave a presentation, with slides, entitled, “Radical Women’s Experience

*Visionaries, continued on p. 20*



“A girl and a Mosque” by a young girl in Iraq. The drawing was contributed by the Iraq Children’s Art Exchange Project (see article beginning on p. 5).

## An Anti-Imperialist Peoples' Movement Takes Shape in Lebanon

by Sharin Chiorazzo

A Peoples' Movement against US Imperialism and Israeli Apartheid is taking shape in Lebanon. The March 8th Movement seems to be in keeping with other anti-imperialist peoples' movements currently unfolding in other places in the developing world, demanding fairness, justice, and an end to the western domination that kept these countries down in the latter part of the twentieth century. The people are no longer tolerating this and are demanding change worldwide.

Nowhere has this become more evident than in Lebanon, where a growing tent city, made up mostly of impoverished persons on the social margins of Lebanese society, have gathered in Beirut since December 1, and have no intention of leaving until the US backed government of Fuad Siniora steps down and is replaced by a national unity government representing all Lebanese political parties and progressive organizations on the left.

Many of the people who make up the March 8th Movement (Shiites from Amal and Hezbollah, the Free Patriotic Movement led by Michel Aoun, the Marada Party, the Druze Democratic Party, the Lebanese Communist Party and others) now gathered in Beirut's Martyr's Square are from the South or from Dahye, a southern suburb of Beirut, where last summer the residents suffered massive casualties, the killing of their loved ones and the destruction of their homes and neighborhoods at the hands of an Israeli military campaign to destroy Lebanon. They are joined by Christians, Druze, Armenians, Palestinians, guest workers from Syria and others in their demands for the Siniora Government to step down. In last summer's massive Israeli invasion, more than 1200 Lebanese civilians were killed and tens of billions of dollars in property, including homes, schools, infrastructure and entire towns, were destroyed.

Hezbollah is currently undertaking rebuilding efforts in the South at a speed that puts the US administra-



tions' abysmal efforts in New Orleans and the Lebanese government's efforts in Lebanon to shame; Hezbollah is providing approximately \$1,000 per day, per family toward rebuilding efforts in the South, as this progressive transformation of Lebanon takes place on many levels.

Some brave and courageous comrades from the NY Al-Awda (Palestine Right to Return Coalition), NY Defend Palestine, and the Campaign for Accountability in Palestine and Lebanon (a group affiliated with the International Action Center in NY) recently returned from two delegations to Lebanon, one earlier this fall, and a more recent delegation that returned on December 12th. Sara Flounders, Co-Director of the International Action Center, Samia Halaby, a Palestinian Artist and long-time Palestinian Human Rights Activist, Bill Cecil of the International Action Center, and Maryloo from NY Al-Awda were recently in Lebanon. The latter three recently returned from the large demonstration and tent city in Beirut, which has been attended by nearly half the population of Lebanon

(approximately 2 million) and continues to grow.

When asked what she thought of this growing peoples' movement that has morphed into a major grassroots event since she left, Sara Flounders commented that this was "no surprise to her at all." She noted that when she was in Lebanon earlier this fall, Hezbollah had garnered tremendous support among the Lebanese masses, where the government of Siniora, which is basically viewed as an American puppet regime, had no standing at all among the common people, having failed to protect the population against the recent Israeli invasion or to repel the Israeli forces back across the border.

Hezbollah responded quite differently, holding their positions and forcing the Israelis to leave, but not before Israel had inflicted significant damage on the Lebanese civilian population. In spite of this, the masses making up the current peoples' movement did not hold this against Hezbollah, although it seemed that, with Israel's massive punitive measures against the South in the eleventh hour, which included the launching of millions of cluster

bombs throughout the South just hours before the cease-fire was implemented, Israel intended to create ire among the Lebanese population against Hezbollah for “starting this war.” But, as Sara Flounders points out, this had quite the opposite effect, as most people in the South saw through the smokescreen and realized that this invasion was not about the abduction of two Israeli soldiers, but about US and Israeli designs in the region and the creation of a pretext to go after Hezbollah, Syria, and Iran.

Hezbollah is now seen as a major progressive political force in Lebanon, and the only force capable of rallying support from all the different confessional groups that make up the political fabric of the country. The exception are those on the conservative right, made up of wealthy Maronites and others who strive to protect their privileged positions and don't mind if they do it by aligning with the United States and, indirectly, with Israel. Their position is in violation of the Ta'if Accords, implemented in 1994, which clearly states that no Lebanese faction should ever again align itself with Israel against indigenous Lebanese forces, but that all the confessional groups should work together to bring about national unity. The conservative forces that make up the March 14th Movement represent the interests of the ruling classes made up of Maronites and

other power holders in Lebanon left over from French colonial rule, notes Bill Cecil of the International Action Center. We must not forget that the US military landed in Beirut in 1958 to “protect” the regime of Camille Chamoun (then reigning Maronite President) against Shiite and Mustim forces in Lebanon, and to ensure the retention of Maronite political dominance in the region.

In spite of the level of destruction and the loss of Lebanese life and property due to the 34 day Israeli invasion last summer, Hezbollah still managed to garner massive support among the Lebanese population across the sectarian divide, notes Flounders, especially in the impoverished South. This seems to be because of Hezbollah's immediate response in meeting the economic needs of all families affected by the invasion, not only the Shiites. All progressive forces, from Amal (one of the former Shiite militias of the South) to the Christian left led by Michel Aoun, are mobilizing around the Hezbollah-led movement. Flounders also notes that Hezbollah has a lot of support among the Lebanese masses because, rather than pushing for an Islamic State in Lebanon, Iran and Syria, as is mistakenly presumed in the West, Hezbollah wants to see a government that adequately represents all confessional groups in Lebanon especially those that represent the poor.

Hezbollah also seems committed to challenging State power on a grassroots level, rather than working through the traditional electoral channels that have failed them in the past. The movement is developing more along class lines than sectarian lines. In this way, notes Samia Halaby, it seems to be a truly progressive, anti-imperialist peoples' movement, and is an exciting phenomenon that represents a desire for real social change, rather than simply a changing of the guard. The peoples' movement is devoid of sectarianism, as people of all stripes and persuasions are getting together and showing a lot of love for each other and for Hezbollah, notes Maryloo from Al-Awda, as the March 8th movement continues to grow and to demand a “clean government.” Maryloo describes the movement as anti-imperialist and nationalist, very diverse, yet not religious.

On the other side are the wealthy folks in the government who are doing whatever they can to hold onto State power, including colluding with US and Israeli forces in efforts to cause division and instability among the masses. It seems that these forces want to foment civil strife, as they are attempting to do in Iraq and Palestine. But the people can see through this smokescreen. The Siniora government is increasingly viewed as morally bankrupt, totally

*Lebanon, continued on p. 15*



*Crowd one hour before the big rally.*

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## The Children of Afghanistan Hope Project: An Interview

by Tina Phillips

In honor of International Women's Day, I asked Deeba Haider, a student at California State University, East Bay (CSUEB), to talk about the non-profit organization she helped start in 2005 to help the children of Afghanistan.

*Q. When did you start the Children of Afghanistan Hope Project, and what motivated you to start it?*

A. I and my friend Soraya Ahmadyar (a graduate student at CSUEB) reestablished the Afghan Student Association with the intention of doing fundraisers over here and sending the money back to Afghanistan for the education and welfare of orphans and women. However when Soraya Ahmadyar graduated in 2005, she could no longer be an officer of the club and by then we had already established one school (Padkhow-e-Shana, which is located in the village by the same name), so we decided to start up a non-profit to continue our efforts of providing service to the children of Afghanistan.

*Q. Were there any challenges to starting your non-profit?*

A. Yes. Our biggest challenge has been getting funds. Secondly we had to wait over a year to obtain our 501(c)(3) tax identification number from the Federal government in order to be federally recognized. Recently we received our 501(c)(3), and we are hoping that this will help us gather funds.

*Q. What has the Children of Afghanistan Hope Project done since it started?*

A. "Alhadmulillah" (which means "Thank God"), we have established two schools in Afghanistan. Padkhow-e-Shana Orphanage School for boys with a current enrollment of 48 students was officially recognized by the Afghan government in June 2005. The Girls Literacy and Vocational School opened in March 2006. In



Photo courtesy of the Children of Afghanistan Hope Project.

this school an estimated 50 students are currently officially enrolled, although attendance is at about 84 students. Two well-qualified women head this school, teaching lessons in Islamic studies, sewing, Dari and Pashto (writing and reading). We are planning to hire additional faculty to teach math and science.

*Q. Are you from Afghanistan?*

A. Yes, I come from a traditional Afghan family where we seriously practice our Afghan culture every day. I lived just across from the Afghan-Pakistan border (Khyber Pass, Peshawar), an area that all Afghans consider to be part of Afghanistan. Most of my relatives who lived in Afghanistan through the war are still residing there.

*Q. What do you think of the current state of Afghanistan?*

A. I believe the country is heading toward greater prosperity. I know there's a lot of destruction still going on, and the situation is somewhat

unpredictable. But we have to reflect on some of the positive things going on. And one of those positive things is the organization I helped start being able to send funds for the education of orphans and women.

*Q. What do you think about the way women and girls have been treated in Afghanistan both past and present?*

A. Unfortunately women have been neglected in Afghanistan just like they were and still are neglected around the world. It bothers me more because a Muslim country should be fully aware of women's rights in Islam and follow them through. In Islam, women had been given all those rights and more 1,426 years ago. America, the world power, gave these rights to women only 100 years ago. But it's very unfortunate that our people don't realize that. I cannot say much about the current situation of women because I don't live there, and I don't really believe in second hand information.

*Q. How does the Children of Afghanistan Hope Project help women and girls of Afghanistan?*

A. As you see, we are currently supporting and providing education for almost twice as many females as males. This tells us that women are eager to learn and be part of their community.

*Q. Why did you decide to focus on the children of Afghanistan?*

A. Children of Afghanistan have been through psychological, physical, sexual, and emotional assaults for almost a quarter of a century. They have been abandoned from the Russian invasion until the American-Taliban war. Children of today are our future tomorrow. If we want to have a good future, and make this world a better place, then we must focus on children. Another reason for choosing Afghanistan is because it was easier for us to monitor the schools through a family member, being sure about where the help is going.

*Q. How has starting the Children of Afghanistan Hope Project enriched your life personally?*

A. Oh I love this project! I am a full time student. I am part of the student body at CSUEB, which is like working part time. Then I also have a part-time job, working with special education children. I am the oldest in my family. This adds a bit to my responsibilities, yet I make time for Children of Afghanistan Hope Project because I care about humanity. It matters to me when a child on the other end of the world is going to bed without food. At the same time, working for Children of Afghanistan gives me eternal happiness, and the time I spend in doing something for the organization is actually leisure time for me.

*Q. What are your goals for the future of the Children of Afghanistan Hope Project?*

A. To establish a permanent school open to all residents in all provinces of Afghanistan. To expand our facilities in Kampani (a section of the city of Kabul). To officially register more girls and women into the program. To make at least one visit to our facilities, scheduling a one-week training pro-

gram on fundamental and useful educational topics to help development and increase skill levels at each school. To create more vocational training opportunities at the boys school with hands-on training on a variety of skilled crafts. To provide better facilities, supplies, and learning conditions to every student by providing them with supply bags to use for them-

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**“We are currently supporting and providing education for twice as many females as males.”**

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selves and their families. To organize a donations drive to help people prepare for the upcoming harsh winter season. To put on a Family Fun at the Park Festival in the Bay Area in March 2007 for kids and adults of all ages, for community building.

*Q. How can people get more involved in helping the Children of Afghanistan Hope Project?*

A. Anyone can help and be part of this organization. You can be a donor or volunteer. We hold several events around the year and volunteers are always welcomed. Visit our websites—[www.cahopeproject.com](http://www.cahopeproject.com) and [www.myspace.com/cahopeproject.com](http://www.myspace.com/cahopeproject.com)—to obtain more information about the Children of Afghanistan Hope Project. Also anyone can contact me by phone (510-909-1332) or email ([dee.haider@gmail.com](mailto:dee.haider@gmail.com)) if they are interested in helping out. We greatly appreciate any kind of help. ●

*Tina Phillips is a member of the Editorial Board of The Socialist and a member of the Editorial Collective of Socialist Women.*



Photo courtesy of the Children of Afghanistan Hope Project.

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## Reflections on Cross-Cultural Contact, Knowledge, and Understanding

by Irene Elmerot

I recently saw an episode of the TV show “30 days” hosted by Morgan Spurlock, in which an American man—white, around 40 years old—went to India to find out where his job went, since he lost it due to out-sourcing. His encounters with the contrasts of Indian society were well described in the show, and his interactions with the Indian wife who wanted to be both independent and a housewife were interesting. For the last couple of years, since she married her husband and moved in with his family, this woman had been working in the house: cooking, cleaning, washing, etc. Now she wanted to get a job of her own, even though preferably at her husband’s workplace.

This contrast made me think of my own journey to Israel and Palestine last summer. When I went there, I had the idea of interviewing women doing some kind of technical job, or at least something vaguely connected to technical jobs. Since I knew that a lot of women there were well-educated graduates of both technical and other universities, I expected to find something interesting.

What I found was indeed interesting. Since I went there on a trip to meet members of independent trade unions, I got to see a lot of women in different job sectors: teachers, electricians, hospital workers, and several other occupations. What I didn’t find were women who did anything that might be labelled “man’s work”. Female taxi drivers were unheard of, and the women in the telecom trade union worked as secretaries or did some other kind of administrative work. When I asked some women at this union how come, I got the reply “Why should we? Would you go out and get yourself dirty if you didn’t have to?” which was not what I expected from comparatively radical women.

So how should we “liberated” women of the Western world react to our sisters in Asia or the Middle East when they want jobs, but actually don’t want to have all kinds of jobs? For me, it’s



obvious that women are perfectly able to weld, drive (actually, the average female driver is even better and more careful than the average male driver) and do interior wiring. I have always considered it a part of my liberation, and that I wouldn’t hesitate if I wanted to have that kind of job. I know some people find it weird, but it’s not unacceptable in my part of the world. To realize that these Palestinian women actually were totally happy without this “liberty” was something I had to reflect on.

I also, inevitably, got to talk to a young woman about religion. Since she worked for a relatively radical organization but still wore a veil (hijab), I had to ask what religion meant to her. First of all, it was something normal and everyday. In a country where almost all women wear some kind of veil as soon as they’re out of the house, religion is more or less what is expected of you. But for me, since that felt like I was back in the beginning of the 20th century, it was of course worth asking about. Her other reason for being religious was that the scriptures tell you how to live a good life. You shouldn’t drink, smoke or abuse your body in any other way. Hey... wait

a minute. That’s fitness, right? I had to reflect some more on this.

Unfortunately, I couldn’t come up with a clear answer.

When I go to work in my town of Göteborg (Sweden), I pass by a school for adult education. Every morning, just before 9 o’clock, I see people pouring out of the tram arriving from the north-east, especially the part called Hammarkullen, where the immigrant communities are located. Several of the women are wearing different kinds of veils. In an interview in the morning paper with some women from that part of town, one of them said, “Well, when I arrived here, I was happy to keep my hair loose some days, and go shopping by bike. Then one day, one of my neighbors came up to me and asked me to stop riding the bike and to put something on to cover my hair, because, she said, ‘This isn’t Sweden, this is Hammarkullen.’”

I’m not done reflecting on this, but right now my feeling is that if you live in a society where it’s normal for people to be religious and to show it, then it’s up to you to adapt to this in your own way. If you’re strong enough to show everyone in the street that you’re

*Cross-Cultural, continued on p. 15*

not going to automatically follow general beliefs and expectations, good for you. If you're not that strong, but still try to fight injustice and prejudice in other ways, fine. But what is wrong is when our Western countries create specific areas where women return to wearing veils or stop riding their bike not because they feel it's the right thing to do, but because their neighbors think it's the right thing to do.

It seems that the solution is integration. Not integration as in "let's put immigrants in schools or at a job and they'll learn to be just like us", but as in "let's make sure new immigrants live in areas where the population is mixed. If there aren't such areas, we have to create them, by building a mix of different kinds of housing and making sure that different kinds of people want to go live there."

What I believe is that we'll never get to know each other and understand each other, unless we live together and meet in the grocery store, at the pizza place, or the café-- sharing our opinions about everyday things like which coffee syrup flavor is the best, or discussing the dry summer.

Only then might we understand and deal with the problems an Indian woman has about getting a call center job while taking care of her husband's entire family, or the reason for radical women in the Middle East to still wear veils and not want to get the same jobs as their male relatives, or why a woman in Sweden in the beginning of the 21st century claims that a part of Sweden is not really Swedish. ●

*Irene Elmerot is a Swede, living in Göteborg on Sweden's west coast. She's working as a freelance translator and therefore part of the IT and Media section of the Göteborg local of Sweden's anarcho-syndicalist union SAC, and is very happy to read that female taxi drivers have just started their own taxi company in Iran, despite the religious fanatics that rule their country.*

illegitimate, and absolutely incapable of solving the problems of Lebanese society. As in other places where peoples' revolutions are taking place, such as Mexico and Venezuela, notes Halaby, the fissures and weaknesses of US imperialism are becoming evident, as people call for social transformation in their respective societies.

There is no telling what will happen in Lebanon, as US backed forces there attempt to crush this progressive movement and hang onto their power at all costs. The other side is currently striking back at the progressive movement with paranoia, fear, violence, and hatred, which came to a fevered pitch as one demonstrator, twenty year old Ahmed Mahmoud of the Amal Movement was gunned down by the Lebanese army on his way home from the protest, comments Bill Cecil of the International Action Center. The progressive opposition, who could have responded with violence, was held at bay by Hezbollah, who went out to the villages and appealed for calm, insisting that there should be no violent response.

After the assassination of Pierre Gemayel, from a very prominent Maronite ruling family and a member of the Phalangist (Kata'ib) Party (named after the fascist forces in Franco's Spain and Mussolini's Italy, notes Maryloo), Maronites and others who represent a significant portion of the ruling class were out in force, flying French flags, chanting "death to Syria" and calling for the disbanding of Hezbollah.

The tent city continues to grow, as the people making up the movement insist they are going to stay there until the government steps down. There were women in head scarves and bling bling, notes Maryloo, demonstrating the diversity of the movement and the significant role

that women are playing. Flounders remarked that within "the progressive vein of Hezbollah, women of all stripes are playing a very prominent role."

Elaborating on this, Maryloo comments that the women attending the December rally included Muslims, Christians, and even communists. The average age was early to mid twenties, although there were some middle-aged women, as well as some very young women. Many women were job hunters and students. Among them were also mothers and others representing a mix of the Lebanese female population.

When asked, the women wearing Islamic dress said that they did so to make a political statement, since they would rather be judged by their brains than their looks. Also, western dress is associated with western (particularly U.S.) imperialism. Other women did not dress in traditional Islamic fashion, but they did not frown upon it, underscoring the sense of unity among the women of Hezbollah. Women also played a big role in both rally security and media. Many al-Manar TV and al-Nour Radio correspondents were women, conducting interviews while men performed child care duties. This is not at all the picture painted by the western media about Hezbollah.

Hussein Hussein, a 24 year old from Dahye commented, "This is the real new Middle East, not the Middle East of Condoleeza Rice.... This is a true peoples' Middle East.●"

*Sharin Chiorazzo is a Palestinian Human Rights Activist, Educator and Member of the Socialist Party, USA. She hosts "Live from Palestine" on WBAI Radio Pacifica, 99.5 FM in New York (www.wbai.org).*

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## Talking Points Towards Peace in the Middle East

Steve Rossignol, Socialist Party of Texas

As these words are being penned, Palestine is bordering on civil war, Iraq is in the midst of civil war, the United States is considering troop escalations in Iraq, and there is talk of dropping The Big One on Iran.

And another tenuous cease-fire is in effect between Israel and the Palestinians. We will cross our fingers and hope that this snowball has a least a small bit of a chance.

But the sad reality is that peace in the Middle East is something that will not be easy to achieve. It would be nice if generations of inter-ethnic strife could be dissolved by a simple declaration of a cease-fire or the quick passage a resolution at the United Nations, but the more realistic appraisal towards peace is one that will take hard work and commitment on all sides.

This realistic appraisal is one that understands, quite logically, that as long any foreign military presence is in an invaded area, there will always be national resistance to the occupier. If we were invaded here in the United States, all of us would be involved in the fight against the intruder. We must understand and expect that in other countries this also holds true. So, quite simply, one of the most important and essential first steps towards peace in the Mid East is the withdrawal of all foreign troops from all occupied territories. Israel must withdraw from the occupied areas of Palestine, and the United States must withdraw from Iraq. Period. It doesn't get much simpler than that.

While here in the United States we do not have great influence on the inner workings of the governments in Israel and Palestine, and we understand that getting Israel to

withdraw from the West Bank and the Golan Heights will take more than the writing of this simple article, we do have a little more influence on the workings of our own government. A very realistic appraisal for peace would be for socialists and other peace activists to mobilize for a massive effort to pressure our government to pressure Israel.

**“The role of  
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This of course is not as easy as it sounds, but it is realistic. We should be actively involved in telling Congress that they need to withdraw all military aid and assistance to Israel. Period.

The role of the US in the Mid East borders on the criminal. The United States supplied Israel with the rock-

ets used to bomb Beirut and destroy the Lebanese infrastructure during the recent Israeli-Lebanese War, rockets which appear to have been deliberately aimed at civilian populations. Again, the United States needs to stop providing any military materiel to Israel.

The Israel-Palestine situation is inextricably linked to the US involvement in Iraq. The launching of scud missiles against the security of Israel by Iraq during Gulf War I has been suggested as a reason for the US invasion of Iraq in Gulf War II, and this may very well be the case (along with a healthy US appetite for petroleum). But now the quagmire in Iraq is becoming another Vietnam.

There is no easy way out for the US at this point, and there is no easy solution for peace. Again, the role of the US as a foreign invader is paramount, and until the US withdraws, there will be no peace. The question for US policy makers is how much can be salvaged from the US debacle while, of course, retaining access to the vast petroleum reserves in that country. It would appear that perhaps it is time to begin thinking of Iraq as three nations, and perhaps begin the process of a trilateral division of that nation into Sunni, Shiite, and Kurd principalities. It would also seem logical that the petroleum in Iraq should be equitably distributed among the three nations, and used for the collective rebuilding of what the United States has destroyed. Income from that oil should be an incentive for growth, repair, and peace, not a source of profit for the corporate privateers. ●



## The Coalition of Women for Peace

**T**he Coalition of Women for Peace has become one of the leading voices in Israel advocating for a just and viable peace between Israel and Palestine ever since its founding in November 2000, just six weeks after the current Intifada began.

The Coalition brings together independent women and nine women's peace organizations, some newly formed and others promoting coexistence since the founding of the state of Israel. We are a mix of Jewish and Palestinian women (all citizens of Israel), and we take action to amplify the voices of women calling for peace and justice for all inhabitants of the region.

### Our Principles

The Coalition of Women for Peace seeks to mobilize women in support of human rights and a just peace between Israel and its Arab neighbors, as we work to strengthen democracy within Israel. Our principles:

- An end to the occupation.
- The full involvement of women in negotiations for peace.
- Establishment of the state of Palestine side-by-side with the state of Israel based on the 1967 borders.
- Recognition of Jerusalem as the shared capital of two states.
- Israel must recognize its share of responsibility for the results of the 1948 war, and cooperate in finding a just solution for the Palestinian refugees.
- Opposition to the militarism that permeates Israeli society.
- Equality, inclusion and justice for Palestinian citizens of Israel.

- Equal rights for women and all residents of Israel.
- Social and economic justice for Israel's citizens, and integration in the region.



### What We Do

In addition to supporting the work of its member organizations, the Coalition carries out mass rallies, human rights campaigns, outreach, and advocacy activity.

Twice a year, the Coalition holds mass rallies calling for an end to the occupation. In one, thousands of Israeli and Palestinian women marched through the streets under the banner "We Refuse to be Enemies". We held a Concert for Peace, with Israeli and Palestinian performers. In May 2003, one thousand women dressed in black lay down in a public plaza of Tel Aviv under the banner, "The Occupation is Killing Us All". We have also mobilized women in 150 locations on five continents to hold solidarity vigils during these major events.

The Coalition has provided emergency supplies to women and children in refugee camps, and school

supplies to thousands of Palestinian children. Together with Palestinian women, we recently completed the International Human Rights March of Women, marching for 3 weeks in Israel and Palestine and calling for an end to the occupation and creation of a just peace between our peoples.

With the escalation of violence over recent years, it has become harder and harder for peace movements in Israel to rally public support. Nevertheless, the Coalition has persisted, both independently and in collaboration with others, and believes that peace is possible and that women have a key role in making it happen. ●

### More Information

For more information about the Coalition contact Gila Svirsky at [gsvirsky@netvision.net.il](mailto:gsvirsky@netvision.net.il).

## Putting the Democracy in Democratic Socialism

by David Schaich

In its Statement of Principles, the Socialist Party calls for a “democratic revolution from below” in which working people will organize “to establish a radical democracy that places people’s lives under their own control.”

A major obstacle to building a mass movement for such a democratic revolution is the lack of meaningful democracy in the United States today, a situation that chokes off the very attitudes and institutions we wish to develop in our struggle to move beyond capitalism.

With “democracy” effectively reduced to casting a vote in biennial circuses where the choice is typically between two political parties more similar than they are different, where well over 90% of incumbents win reelection, and where most elections are decided by massive landslides predictable months ahead of time, it is no surprise that most Americans simply don’t bother participating.

The problems are well-known, but now some solutions are beginning to attract attention. While none of the following reforms are specifically socialist, they will help foster the development of the politically involved and empowered populace needed to fulfill our democratic socialist vision. In addition, they will also promote a multi-party environment where socialist politics has a better chance of being heard and taken seriously, where minor parties can be more than just “protest votes.”

Instant runoff voting (IRV) is a simple idea: voters rank candidates in the order they prefer them. The candidate who comes in last is eliminated, and those who voted for her have their votes transferred to their second choices in an “instant run-

off”. This process is repeated until one candidate receives an absolute majority (more than 50% of the votes) and is declared the winner.

IRV’s chief benefit is making it impossible for any candidate to “spoil” any other. Those voting for minor party candidates no longer have to fear that they may help elect the “greater evil”. With voters able, as the saying goes, “to vote their hopes and not their fears”, minor parties such as the Socialist Party have the opportunity to gain more legitimacy and be taken more seriously.

The main objection to IRV made by supporters of minor parties is that IRV reduces their influence on major parties, since they can no longer make demands backed by threats to “spoil” major party candidates. This should not be a concern for those of us in the socialist movement, since we view our mission as spreading socialist ideas and promoting democratic socialism, not as trying to manipulate the Democratic Party.

What’s especially exciting about IRV is that it seems to be a reform whose time has come. In the November 2006 elections, all four IRV ballot questions passed (in Oakland CA, Minneapolis MN, Pierce County WA, and statewide in North Carolina), while all other election reform measures were resoundingly defeated (fusion voting in Massachusetts, lottery voting and voting by mail in Arizona, and public campaign financing in California). IRV seems to have achieved widespread recognition as a simple reform with positive results.

*Democracy, continued on p. 19*

### From the SPUSA Statement of Principles

No oppressed group has ever been liberated except by its own organized efforts to overthrow its oppressors. A society based on radical democracy, with power exercised through people’s organizations, requires a socialist transformation from below. People’s organizations cannot be created by legislation, nor can they spring into being only on the eve of a revolution.

They can grow only in the course of popular struggles, especially those of women, labor, and minority groups. The Socialist Party works to build these organizations democratically.

The process of struggle profoundly shapes the ends achieved. Our tactics in the struggle for radical democratic change reflect our ultimate goal of a society founded on principles of egalitarian, non-exploitative and non-violent relations among all people and between all peoples.

To be free we must create new patterns for our lives and live in new ways in the midst of a society that does not understand and is often hostile to new, better modes of life. Our aim is the creation of a new social order, a society in which the commanding value is the infinite preciousness of every woman, man and child.

A more meaningful reform, though one without IRV's current momentum, is proportional representation (PR), which can replace winner-take-all elections to legislatures on the local, state and national level. As its name suggests, PR makes legislatures more representative by allocating seats in proportion to the votes received by candidates or their parties. (IRV can be used in PR elections, though it's more commonly known as single transferable voting--STV--in this context.)

The level of representation can be adjusted by setting the "victory threshold", i.e., the number of votes a candidate or party needs to win representation. For instance, if today's single-seat districts were replaced by larger districts that each elected three representatives, a candidate would need 25% of the vote to win a seat. The state legislature of Illinois was elected in this fashion for 110 years, until a Reagan-era cost-cutting measure shrunk the legislature by 33%. However, there is an active "Drive to Revive" the system in Illinois, led by the Midwest Democracy Center.

Alternatively, larger districts can be used to produce lower victory thresholds, and can even be mixed with single-seat districts to combine proportional and local representation. Socialists in Massachusetts backed a plan a few years ago in which half of the state legislature would be elected from single-seat districts, while the other half would be elected through votes for party slates in four large districts. Parties receiv-

ing at least 2.5% of the vote in a district would win representation.

Though the lower thresholds of 2.5% to 5% would immediately put representation within our reach, they are often blamed for parliamentary instability, and higher thresholds of 17% to 25% are currently more popular proposals.

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However, the lower thresholds are common in Western Europe and have resulted in a stronger voice for the Left with no discernible ill effects.

Direct election of the President has also made major strides for-

ward in the last year, in the form of an initiative in which states agree to give all their electoral college votes to the winner of the national popular vote, effectively circumventing the electoral college. The initiative has been passed by the California legislature, though it was vetoed by the governor, and at least 29 states will consider it in 2007.

Though eliminating the electoral college would create a more democratic system for electing the President, it would do relatively little to promote the democratization of U.S. politics and public life in general. More meaningful reforms include rational ballot-access laws for minor parties and their candidates, universal voter registration, public campaign financing, and demanding voter-verified paper audit trails for all voting equipment.

Though none of these measures would move us beyond capitalism, they would help prepare the ground for democratic socialism by building more meaningful democracy, as well as democratic habits of thought and action (including organizing coalitions). They are also issues where we can win without compromising our principles and our integrity. In this day and age, such victories are all the more valuable for their scarcity.

In the area of electoral activism, there's plenty to be done, and no time to lose.

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in Post-War Iraq.” The task of women after the fall of Saddam and the Ba’ath Party was enormous: factory production stopped, social programs did not exist, domestic abuse escalated, abuse by occupying soldiers, and kidnapping, rape, and murder as a result of the rush for power by a range of internal and external male dominated groups, became rampant. Although Yanar widely publicized the danger of the occupation for governance in Iraq, no political parties put in place an agenda addressing women’s situation and concerns.

The agenda of the Iraq Freedom Congress, formed by Yanar and her supporters, calls for an end to occupation and calls for an egalitarian secular constitution. The Congress advocates for an end to military rule, the rule of religion and/or tribal values, and all other expressions of patriarchal dominance. Iraqis, she noted, are dehumanized in the American press by representing them as a bunch of “ethnic,” “religious” people.

Advocating a strong working class agenda, Yanar travels and speaks throughout the world, connecting issues of class, race, patriarchy, and women’s rights. It took Saddam Hussein thirty years to kill as many people as the U.S. and its allies killed between 2003 and 2005. Thousands of women have been raped, kidnapped, assaulted, or sold into the network of women being trafficked throughout the world. A woman who was severely beaten was rescued by the OWFI after she had gone to the police and been told to go home and that it would be a waste of time for her to take her husband to court. Beginning with its first shelter in an old burnt out bank, Yanar’s organizing efforts have resulted in street campaigns and demonstrations and a massive campaign beginning

with Law Number 137 of the Iraqi Ruling Council that would have replaced Personal Status Law with Sharia Law. She adamantly calls for complete separation of religion

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**“Iraq has also become a wide-open field for the dialectic of patriarchal groups forming alliances while fighting against one another as they vie for power and control of women.”**

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and state as essential to women’s full participation in state building and to their liberation.

Iraq is a case study of violence against women as endemic to war. U.S. administrators in Iraq give power to candidates who suppress women, just as they do at home, while basing their media campaigns on the goal of liberating women from their own racist/sexist constructions of a heinous barbaric Islam and Arab world. The colonialist legacy with its gendered agenda, continues on track.

Further, Yanar’s experience confirms that associating patriarchal

agendas with any one political position can be dangerous. For example, according to Yanar, Al-Jazeera, the network that has been attacked ruthlessly by the U.S. because of its stark and honest reporting, supports compulsory hijab. Parties that support the OWFI (for example, labor, socialist and communist) do so not only because OWFI is composed of women who opposed Saddam Hussein, but also because they want a seat in the new government.

Iraq has also become a wide-open field for the dialectic of patriarchal groups forming alliances while fighting against one another as they vie for power and control of women. Saddam Hussein’s decision to ally with Islamic and tribal traditions was an attempt to consolidate power in the face of colonial incursion. Resistance fighters coming from outside the borders of Iraq have killed more Iraqis than Americans.

Only three women were nominated to the Interim Iraqi Governing Council in July 2003. One of them, Aquila al-Hashimi, died brutally, murdered in front of her house. Women were not included in either the nine member rotating Presidential Council or the committee working on constitutional reform. Currently the quota of women allowed in the Parliament is 25 percent and their politics do not, according to Yanar, challenge the misogynous agenda.

Women in Iraq and Iran are risking their lives daily in order to resist in numerous ways: by reformulating notions of religiosity and secularism; by refusing to participate in divisive constructions of race and ethnicity; by creating grassroots movements that can help to bring women out of poverty; by creating shelters and saving lives; by insisting on women’s

*Visionaries, continued on p. 21*

full participation in all realms; by creating organizations and publications that support women who are entering the arena of state politics and demanding to be heard; by listening to one another across a range of perspectives on how to accomplish these goals; and by linking with women in the United States who have similar goals and are engaged in similar activities.

By rejecting constructions of masculinity that condone the equation of male with violence; by rejecting constructions of “the poor” that condone poverty as biological necessity; by rejecting constructions of race that condone race as biological necessity; by rejecting constructions of geography that condone colonial divisions, we can stop the cycles of violence that dominate geo-politics, domestic politics, and our daily lives.

With support for academic and activist revisioning of history using gender as a central category of analysis in the context of international networks, such as those established by The Global Women’s History Project and numerous other organizations throughout the world, we can continue to develop strategies and actions that pull us back from the precipice of world suffering and destruction that we stand on today. ♦

*This article is excerpted from Elise’s paper documenting and analyzing the presentations given by Iraqi and Iranian women at the fifth Global Women’s History Project Conference at Westfield State College, Westfield, Massachusetts, April 14–17, 2005. Delegates at the Conference were: Yanar Muhammad, Yvette Rab’ia, Nazanin Sharif, Zeinab Istrabada (Iraq); Shala Haeri, Manijeh Hekmat, Persheng Vazeri, Mina Safizadeh for Janet Afary, Shala Haeri for Shabla Sherkat, and Shirin Ebadi (Iran). For the full report, you may contact Elise at eyoung@wsc.ma.edu.*

that they practice it voluntarily. Why then has this massive means of oppression become necessary? Why are all these special forces formed to deal with cultural disobedience, non-observance of the veil, and gender apartheid? I like to ask, are these people a bunch of masochists, who like to practice their culture by being tortured, imprisoned and stoned? What rubbish! Thousands of women who have been executed, stoned and tortured are the symbol of a vast movement against the Islamic laws, gender apartheid, and the Islamic veil.

Perhaps, you may think that this is a peculiar way to demonstrate resistance. I believe there is a straightforward equation: a complex and sophisticated oppressive system only demonstrates that there is a vast and complex resistance to be suppressed. When there are more than one hundred thousand political executions, this bitter and tragic fact exposes that the society does not accept the existing order and wants change.

In Iran there is a special police force to deal with women, those who protest, those who do not observe the veil, and those who are innovative in fashion. This special force was used in the July demonstration in Tehran. It crushed the demonstration.

Despite all the laws against non-observance of the veil and dress code, despite prison sentence, fine and lashing, women in Iran ridicule the veil and in their demonstrations have also burned it. The new generation cannot be silenced, cannot be forced back home. This is the resistance I am talking about.

In Iran there is a vast secular movement for a free and egalitarian society. The women’s liberation movement is one of the main components of this general movement. The de facto status of women is much higher than

their official and legal status. In the eyes of the dominant ideology and legislation, women’s status is half of that of men. A woman is the man’s slave. She cannot travel or work without her “master’s” permission, does not have divorce or custody rights, cannot become a judge or a president. But women in Iran have not been subdued to accept this status and image. They want to be a whole person, independent and equal.

I like to mention a statistical figure: around 66% of university entrants are female. This is in a country where you need to pass difficult entrance exams. There is very high competition. You also have to take into consideration the state’s efforts to push women home. Is this statistic accidental? No. This is a trend. Every year this figure has risen, from 30% to 66%. The parliament tried to pass laws to reverse this trend, to prevent women from getting into university in this high number. They argued that this is very detrimental to Islam and the institution of family. The Islamic parliament becomes alarmed by these statistics, I become overjoyed. This shows a resilient resistance on the part of new generation of women in Iran. This brings hope that women’s liberation in Iran is alive and kicking.

March 8 has become an established tradition in Iran. In the past few years, March 8 has been celebrated in different cities and in different ways. I recall in 1979, we organized several March 8 celebrations in Tehran. The society was free from monarchist dictatorship, and we, the women’s rights activists, were celebrating 8 March for the first time. On the same day Khomeini ordered women to wear the veil. A large demonstration took to the streets to protest this reactionary order and demand women’s equality. This was the birth

of a women's right movement that was silenced after 2 years.

The Islamic Republic tried a propaganda tactic. It named the birthday of Mohammad's daughter as women's day. The specialty of this regime has been to suppress a movement not only by brutal force but by means of demagogic propaganda. It crushed the 1979 revolution by calling its state a revolutionary state,

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**“It is our duty, it is the responsibility of women's rights activists, to transform this method of self-inflicting hurt into a positive resistance.”**

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its brutal forces the revolutionary guards, and the revolution itself, an Islamic revolution. It disarmed the left by taking over the so-called anti-imperialist movement by manipulating anti-American sentiments and taking Americans hostage at the American Embassy. Naming the Prophet's daughter's birthday

“women's day” was a similar tactic. However, this tactic worked only for a few years. Then it was forced to assign a women's week. This did not work either. Last year it was forced to admit defeat and a faction of the regime recognized 8 March as women's day. 8 March now is an established tradition in Iran. Last year there were many different rallies and meetings organized to commemorate 8 March. Some of them, including one in Tehran, were suppressed. 3 months later there was a large protest organized in Tehran, several thousand took part. This was crushed.

A couple of months later a movement was initiated to collect 1 million signatures for changing the laws in women's favor. The women's liberation movement is not going to resign nor be silent. They try to crush it, it rises again even stronger. It seems that all efforts to suppress it only makes it more resilient and stronger.

These are the positive aspects of women's resistance. Unfortunately, there is a dark and sad dimension to it, as well. The number of suicides and putting fire to oneself has increased considerably among women, specially among young women. Women in Iran have always lived under discrimination. Forced marriages, extensive restrictions on their lives, being in a servitude status vis a vis the men has always been the fact of life for the majority of women in Iran.

It seems that women used to accept this as a divine and natural law, and be resigned to it. However, in the past decade we are witnessing a significant rise in suicide. This is a protest. The woman of the new gen-

eration has different expectations and aspirations. She does not resign herself to “fate”. She wants to take her life into her own hands. When she cannot protest collectively, when she cannot direct her anger and disapproval against the state, she directs them against herself. These self-inflicting harms are a means of protest.

It is our duty, it is the responsibility of women's right activists, to transform this method of self-inflicting hurt into a positive resistance. We must change this desperation into hope for change.

Another negative fact is the high number of girls who escape the restrictions and violence in the home in search of freedom and end up in the streets, homeless, unprotected, and become victims of prostitution. They are abused and exploited. Many of these girls wear male clothing, hoping to be freer and less harassed. However, there is no escape. The life of these girls is a telling story of brutality, exploitation and cruelty.

In my opinion, the last two factors are new sociological phenomena in a society undergoing profound social, cultural, political and economic changes. Analysis of this situation takes us to a massive and deep-rooted social resistance against the ruling order, dominant ideology and culture, against the ancient and antiquated values of Islam.

And last but not least, we should mention the diverse cultural and NGO organizations that fight for women's rights. These organizations must adapt themselves to the suppressive state and laws. We are witnessing the coming to birth of

*Mass Resistance, continued on p. 23*

many different organizations, festivals, and solidarity camps. These are the bright and hopeful aspects of women's resistance.

My friends, there is a mass resistance movement in Iran against sexual discrimination and for gender equality. This movement needs your solidarity and support. If we succeed in freeing women from oppression and misogynic laws and values, this would open up a door to all women in the Middle East and countries under the rule of Islam. We must launch a vast international movement against discrimination, violence and systematic oppression, against gender apartheid and Islamic veil. The Organisation for Women's Liberation calls upon you to join this movement.

We have drawn a resolution against gender apartheid, I ask you to support it. Show your support by applauding and sign our petition. Thank you. ●

*Editors note: This speech is published with the author's permission. It was given at the International Women's Rights Conference in Dusseldorf, Germany, October 12-14, 2006, and was interrupted many times by applause of the audience. The resolution was endorsed by heavy applause, and hundreds signed the petition during the conference.*

*Azar Majedi is a veteran women's rights activist from Iran. She is also the editor of Medusa, a journal about women and socialism; a broadcaster for New Channel, a satellite TV channel broadcasting into Iran, the Middle East, and Europe in Farsi and English; and a leader of the Worker Communist Party of Iran.*

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