

Academics Say Women Should Be Part of Peace Talks

By Jennifer Friedlin

NEW YORK—Nine months after the 9/11 attack in America, academics, activists and policy makers are just beginning to ask difficult questions about the global crisis and explore ways to ease tensions between America and people around the world opposed to the dominance of this only remaining superpower.

At the forefront of this new debate are women, many of whom are working on issues surrounding global terrorism, the growing economic disparity between the world's rich and poor, and the cultural conflicts that have led to violence on a massive scale.

In late April, the National Council for Research on Women, an alliance of 92 women's research and policy centres in the United States, held their three-day conference entitled "Facing Global and National Crises: Women Define Human Security." Organisers said they hoped the event would look at how terrorism, violence and poverty affect women around the world, and the role women can play in addressing these issues.

"A new concept of human security is being used that shifts the notion of security of the nation to the idea of the protection, well-being and safety of people," said Linda Basch, the council's executive director. "We wanted to bring more of a gender lens to this issue."

Academics Could Lead Activism

Unlike many conferences that focus solely on the academic, Basch said that this event—which drew about 300 participants, including some from Latin America, Central Europe and Central Asia—was also designed to rekindle the activist spirit in the global women's movement. Panelists from esteemed academic and research institutions including Harvard, the World Bank and the Soros Foundation Network spoke on the need for women to begin exploring ways of bridging the gap between academia and activism. Some speakers implored the audience to take a vigorous role in resolving the pressing security issues of the 21st century.

"It seems very important, even in our roles as women's studies and gender studies people, to begin to do more than just sort of reach out in a kind of passive way," said Alison Bernstein, vice president of the education, media, arts and culture programme at the Ford Foundation. "It's very important to take our voices and try and find solidarity with voices of people like us in countries that are in the midst of probably the most dangerous time that

many of us can remember."

Although Bernstein acknowledged that the current militaristic climate has had a dampening effect on even her own sense of empowerment, she noted that small activities carry weight. Pointing to some of the seemingly insignificant protests against apartheid in South Africa, Bernstein said that people gained a sense of strength through relatively small demonstrations that enabled them to keep up a fight that eventually put an end to the racist regime.

Rightful Role in Security Discussions

Bernstein's rallying cry had the support of many of the academics, advocacy workers and policy makers in attendance, some of whom have been actively promoting the notion that women need to find their rightful place in the global peace movement.

Amy Caiazza, study director at the Institute for Women's Policy Research and a speaker at the conference, cited a report she issued in November entitled "Why Gender Matters in Understanding September 11: Women, Militarism, and Violence." The report explores the link between a society's tolerance of violence towards women and the likelihood that it would promote violence in other ways.

"Perhaps our collective neglect of the treatment of women in Afghanistan was a missed opportunity to fore-

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see or even prevent the events of September 11, 2001," she wrote in the study.

Caiazza also pointed out that women are generally more likely to be involved with peace movements than terrorist or military activities. From the number alone of female-dominated peace groups around the world, Caiazza argued, women should be playing a major role in combating terrorism and violence on a global scale.

"When you look at women's movements across the globe, they are generally pro-peace," she said. "Women seem to have something very important to say about putting an end to violence."

Women in UN, NATO

Many of the women participants called on the U.S. government to widen its efforts to bring more women and women's organisations into the policy-making fold, and to earmark more financial aid to women's global peace movements. They also stressed the importance of UN Security Council Resolution 1325, which mandates the United Nations, North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and other international bodies to seek women's inputs in ceasefire negotiations and post-war reconstruction efforts.

While the big global organisations approve resolutions that call for a louder female presence at the negotiating table, some women's organisations and individuals are already building international bridges that

could form the backbone of a rejuvenated global women's movement. Conference speaker Eleanor Smeal pointed out that her Feminist Majority stepped up its efforts to support Afghan women and their fight for equality in the aftermath of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

Individuals such as Rabab Abdulhadi, a professor at New York University's Center for the Study of Gender and Sexuality and a Palestinian national, have long been engaged with women's groups on both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian political divide as a way of bringing about peaceful solutions to the long-standing conflict. And now the time has come, Abdulhadi said, to begin mobilising on an even broader scale.

"For better or worse the world is much more interdependent and, therefore, as activists we, too, need to be more interconnected," Abdulhadi said.

Jennifer Friedlin is a freelance writer based in New York.

For more information:
The National Council for Research on Women: <http://www.ncrw.org/events/2002annconf.htm>
Institute for Women's Policy Research report: "Why Gender Matters in Understanding September 11: Women, Militarism, and Violence": <http://www.iwpr.org/pdf/terrorism.pdf>

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