

CRT Blogs

Tara's Blog from Israel - 2011

My name's Tara and I'm currently doing research in Israel and Palestine in order to get some information for my thesis which is focusing on women and peacebuilding. I'm hoping to meet with people from different organizations to get a feel for what's happening and what kind of activities are taking place between women that address issues of inequality and injustice and promote cross cultural acceptance between Israeli and Palestinian communities.

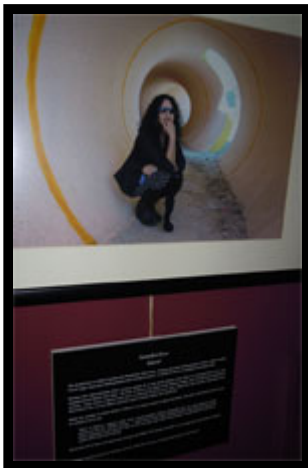
It is widely recognised worldwide that women suffer most during conflict. Women lose husbands, and sons in battles. They generally bear the brunt of refugees who are hosted by families. In many patriarchal societies women cannot leave their homes without the company of a male family member. Those who are left alone during warfare are often victims of malnutrition or starvation as they cannot gain access to food. The increased vulnerability they experience in times of conflict means that they are often the direct targets of sexual violence and other forms of gender based violence. Women are forced to watch their children grow up under horrendous and traumatic circumstances.

What this mean is that throughout history, women have consistently proven that they are able to set aside nationalisms and differences in order to work together for the sake of peace and for the sake of their children. While there are a huge number of formal women's organizations that exist in this part of the world, both indigenous and International, many of the peacebuilding efforts which take place are ad-hoc and informal and thus often go unrecognized. Activities often take place at community and village level between women who want to engage in dialogue and joint projects with the opposite side in order to secure a better future for their families and themselves.

It is my hope that I will be able to meet with some of these courageous women during my time here, in order to document their important role and to highlight their essential contribution to the Peace Process.

Tara's Blog from Israel - 08/08/2011

Last week I had the chance to attend a photo exhibition in the Austrian Hospice here in the Old City of Jerusalem by photographer Pat Westwater-Jong. She has travelled all around Israel and Palestine, meeting with local and international pacemakers, taking photos of the extraordinary work they are doing. Her exhibition is called 'Courage and Compassion in the Holy Land' and details work by Muslim, Jewish and Christian peace activists. (For more info see - <http://www.austrianhospice.com/en/news.htm#anker284>)



A highlight of the exhibition includes some wonderful photos of the Jerusalem Peacemakers and their annual event 'The Big Hug of Jerusalem'. The Jerusalem Peacemakers is a network of interfaith humanitarian peacemakers who encourage understanding, peace and reconciliation among all faiths. Each year they have an event which begins with groups of people outside the walls of the Old City at Jaffa Gate (easily accessible for people of West Jerusalem) and Damascus Gate (easily accessible for people of East Jerusalem) the groups then meet together at New Gate where people of all faiths mingle, play music and drum together – much to the wonder of passers-by who are drawn to the happy crowd and the multi-cultural, peaceful atmosphere.

Also documented is the wonderful work of Ibtisam Mahameed, Muslim feminist peacemaker who was honoured

by the Dalai Lama in 2009 as an 'Unsung Hero of Compassion'. Ibtisam is not only a member of a number of peace organizations; she is also the founder of Women Reborn, a social empowerment programme for Arab women which you can read about on this website.

Other photos include Palestinian individuals who are working for peace in their own villages, and are involved in non-violent protests against the Segregation Wall which is cutting off so many people's livelihoods, children's access to education, dividing villages and separating families from each other.

Also photographed are courageous Israelis who have chosen to speak out against the occupation: organizations like Machsom Watch, Women in Black and Breaking the Silence; and individuals such as Nomika Zion from Sderot, the border town which has received the brunt of rockets fired from Gaza. Nomika Zion bravely wrote an essay in 2009 condemning the IDF's Operation Cast Lead on Gaza saying that "The bloodbath in Gaza is not in my name nor for my security".

I highly recommend a visit to this exhibition for anyone who wants to get an idea about the nationwide work of peacemakers and peacebuilders in this beautiful and tragic land.

Tara's Blog from Israel - 08/14/2011

I've spent the past week in the North of Israel. I started off in a city called Haifa, which is located in a beautiful spot at the foot of the very famous Mount Carmel, and right on the Mediterranean. Haifa is a bustling city, known for its spectacular views of the bay and the beautiful Baha'i gardens which slope down the mountain as well as a sculpture park dedicated to peace. It is also a mixed Arab and Jewish city of surprising tolerance, where for the most part it would appear that both cultures live together in visible harmony.

While there, I made a visit to Kayan, a Feminist organization whose aim is to enhance the status of Palestinian women in Israel. There, Rula Deeb introduced me to the work of the organization. Kayan invests in the development of grassroots leadership in Arab communities. These leaders then go on to help empower local women in decision making so as to take a more active part in their communities. Kayan also provides consultation and legal representation to women in need, and through educational seminars and publications provide women with information about their rights as Israeli citizens to social security, fair employment, protection from sexual harassment, and so on. It was really interesting to hear Rula's perspective, as a Palestinian citizen of Israel, and to hear her speak of the important work that Kayan is doing. The Arab communities have traditionally been discriminated against and marginalized in Israel and this work is helping to give women a sense of empowerment and achievement in their villages, as well as increasing their well-being through information and access to support.



I spent the next few days in the little Arab port of Akka, a few kilometres north of Haifa. Akka has a rich cultural heritage - the Egyptians, Greeks, Seleucids, Arabs, Crusaders, Ottomans and British have all had a history here. It has a beautiful Old City, with narrow rambling laneways, tunnels and countless historic attractions which include the Old City Walls, Arab khans, churches, mosques, two small ports and an underground city and prisoners' museum. Although a UNESCO World Heritage site, Akka has remained a modest, sleepy little town. Down at the port, local Arabs and Jews smoke the traditional Narghila (flavoured tobacco) side by side while watching the Syrian soap operas that come out especially for Ramadan, on large outdoor screens.

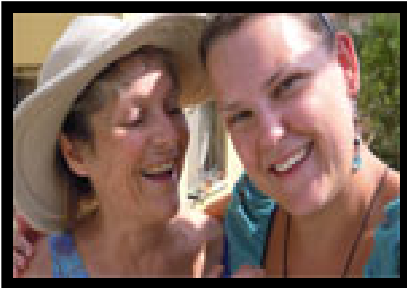
The Palestinian owner of the hostel where I stayed spent a long time talking to me about the troubled and sad history of the people in the region, the situation today and how all they want is to live their lives in peace together with their Jewish neighbours. He also took a few of us on a tour of the upper Galilee and Golan Heights

where we visited national parks, beautiful Jewish and Arab villages situated on top of the mountains. We saw spectacular views of the countryside and ate wonderful traditional Druze food in a small village near the border with Syria. Many of the areas we passed had once been Palestinian Arab or Syrian villages which were taken over by Israel after 1948 and 1967. Their original occupiers, many of whom today are refugees in neighbouring countries, are still waiting for justice and a solution to their plight. Most want to return home.

Tara's Blog from Israel - 08/16/2011

I've just spent two wonderful days meeting with various women peacemakers in the surrounding areas of Haifa. From ex-soldiers, to midwives, masseurs to psychologists, the women in this area are highly active in their desire to help those around them.

Yesterday I travelled to the beautiful little Jewish village of Zichron Yaakov, set on a hill top overlooking the valley below. I met with the wonderful Ronit Roth, a Jewish woman who over the years has been engaged in peacebuilding work in various countries including the United States, England, and Israel and Palestine. She has



been involved in facilitating dialogue and peace circles, and walks for peace across Israel. Today Ronit is very involved in local Arab villages, helping women and children in various ways such as doing arts and crafts, massage and yoga, as well as still being involved in peace activism and dialogue. She opened up her beautiful home and garden to me and it was wonderful to listen to her speak of her views on love and peace and how overcoming fear of 'the other' is the way to achieve this. We spent hours chatting about our lives, eating her wonderful home-cooked food and drinking lots of tea and coffee. She is truly an inspiration in the work that she does and her outlook on peaceful living with each other and our planet..

Ronit also took me to meet Ibtisam Mahmeed, a religious Musim woman who I have mentioned in a previous blog, in the neighbouring Arab village of Fureidis where they both engage in peacebuilding work. Although it is Ramadan, and fasting takes its toll on the people, Ibtisam welcomed us into her home where she had prepared wonderful food – lamb in yoghurt, rice, delicious soup, home-grown olives and vegetables, homemade- hummus with bread, sheep's yoghurt and every variety of delicious fruit imaginable. I also got to meet her family. Fureidis is also set up on a hill with wonderful views. Together we sat on her back patio, watching the full moon rise, listening to the jackals and crickets in the valley below, and talking about her work.

Ibtisam is the founder of the social empowerment programme for Arab women in the village, called 'Women Reborn' and is involved in numerous other peacebuilding activities. One particular activity which she spoke to me about was how she facilitates conversations where women can just sit and talk to each other, and listen to each other's tales about their lives. They can each talk about their own traumatic experiences, their sadness and their joys, how they feel about each other and how they feel themselves. It is a form of building bridges between each other. This grassroots dialogue is what eventually breaks down barriers between the different cultures and is essential for a future sustainable peace.

These women that I have had the fortune of meeting are truly admirable, and the politicians could definitely learn a few things from them about making peace.

Tara's Blog from Israel - 08/20/2011

This week I have met with two women who are part of an organization called Midwives for Peace, a grassroots organization of Palestinian and Israeli women who work together to provide critical pre-natal care and childbirth support to women in the West Bank and Israel.

In Nahariya in the North of Israel I met with an Israeli woman named Gomer and in East Jerusalem I met with a Palestinian woman named Aisha. Between them they gave me a lot of insight into their work both in Israel and in the Occupied Territories. Women in the West Bank experience many problems during pregnancy and childbirth due to the lack of local resources and access to health care. They also experience many difficulties trying to reach hospitals due to military roadblocks and checkpoints. Many women have died giving birth at checkpoints because Palestinian ambulances are prevented from crossing into Israel and so women have to change ambulances which causes severe stress and harms both mother and baby. By sharing knowledge and best practices, Midwives for Peace helps ensure that birthing under these circumstances is a safer process for these women. They also work with refugee communities within Israel who suffer from similar difficulties.



They spoke to me of the difficulties grassroots organizations like theirs face – from resentment within their own communities, who don't want them to be talking to 'the other side', to lack of funding. Their resilience over the years in dealing with these problems is admirable. The women that are part of this organization truly believe in what they are doing and by continuing to break down barriers they have developed true friendships with each other and demonstrate that peace and co-existence is possible.

After meeting with Aisha she invited me back to her home for Iftar – the breaking of the fast during Ramadan. There I met her husband and children and we had fantastic meal – all kinds of vegetables, rice and meat dishes, pickles, olives, yoghurt and traditional Ramadan sweets and cakes for dessert. Afterwards her very talented daughter and her friends entertained me with their traditional Palestinian dancing, while her 8 year old son gave me a lot of laughs with his own versions and hijinks!

In September I will be seeing Gomer and Aisha again to attend one of the regular meetings of Midwives for Peace, where I will be able to get some more insight into their work as well as meet some of the other women who are part of this wonderful organization.

Tara's Blog from Israel - 09/29/2011

The last few weeks of my travels were pretty much a rollercoaster of meeting with different women and different organizations in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and the West Bank, re-visiting friends and seeing some more of this beautiful land. Everywhere I go I have been given more insight into the different points of view, from Palestinian women struggling on a day to day basis to fight the oppression and apartheid of the Segregation Wall, to Orthodox Jewish women seeking to maintain dialogue between both sides, to Mizrahi Jewish women who bring their own variation of opinions and qualms with the situation as they struggle to fight not only against the Occupation, but also against the discrimination they still face within Jewish society and within the women's movement. Opinions differ vastly between groups on many issues, for example: the possibility of Palestinian statehood; the solution to the plight of the millions of Palestinian refugees; the issue of the illegal settlements, including those built in Jerusalem. However they all have one thing in common and that is their desire for a positive and just change. They are seeking to have their voices and ideas heard and more than anything they want a change that produces visible and fair solutions on the ground for all.

Unfortunately not all my experiences left me feeling positive. In the little village of Al Walaja on the outskirts of Jerusalem I spoke to a woman who explained to me the horror of what the Wall is doing to people. Although not entirely finished, when it is the wall will encircle the whole village leaving people with access in and out through one single military checkpoint – essentially a prison. In Ramallah I listened to a woman speak about how it is not possible to have peace while living under Occupation, something which had been said to me many

times over the course of the summer. Most women have too many important things to worry about in just surviving from one day to the next and the idea of real 'peace' under these circumstances is not possible. However, what is good is that there are people who understand this and many women's organizations such as Women in Black or the Coalition of Women for Peace have made it their main aim to resist the Occupation.

At the start of September I had the pleasure of attending a meeting between the women from Midwives for Peace. It took place in a beautiful little Christian village in the West Bank, just outside Bethlehem. There were almost 20 women there from all parts of society: young and old; religious and secular Muslims from Jerusalem and the West Bank; Mizrahi and Ashkenazi Jews – both Israeli and American born. Together they discussed their situations, their lives, their hopes for the near future, how to improve the situation for women giving birth under difficult circumstances, and how to make their voices heard in their quest for peace. What was most wonderful about this meeting was that it was so obvious that these women really care for each other. They aren't just women from an organization with a similar goal; they are friends – hugging, laughing, dancing together, inquiring about families, sharing jokes, stories and lunch. It was really a fantastic day and it was wonderful to take away that image with me as one of my final days in the country.

I think that the next few months and years will be crucial in setting the scene for the future. Many people are close to breaking point and something major needs to happen if people are to see any real changes in their lives. These changes will not involve only politics and security which is often at the heart of male discourse, but will involve making peoples' lives easier while enabling them to live with dignity and happiness. I believe that women have a special contribution to make to this process of change and I just hope that those with the decision-making abilities start to listen to what those at grass roots are telling them.

I am now back in Ireland where I come from, doing my final write-ups for my thesis. In the weeks before I left attacks had broken out in the South of Israel; hundreds of Palestinians were being arrested indiscriminately in Hebron and Nablus; approval had gone through for 1600 Jewish homes to be built on Palestinian land in East Jerusalem; the IDF had armed settler groups in the West Bank in the days leading up to the Palestinian bid for statehood; the army had blocked off the Old City of Jerusalem, not allowing the under 50s to go and pray in the mosque, demanding ID from everyone who wanted to enter the city; olive trees were being burned or uprooted and houses were being demolished; thousands of children continued to suffer from malnutrition, lack of access to education and post-traumatic stress syndrome; millions of refugees continued to wait for a solution to their plight; and millions of Israelis and Palestinians continued to live in fear and resentment of 'the other'. Let's hope that change comes soon.