

Women Reborn: A Case Study of the Intersection of Women, Religion and Peace Building in a Palestinian Village in Israel

Andrea K. Blanch, PhD

Co-Authors: Esther Herzog, PhD and Ibtisam Mahameed

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Introduction

This chapter presents a case study of *Women Reborn*, a women’s empowerment program in a Muslim Palestinian village in northern Israel. Funded with a grant from the Clark Charitable Trust in England, *Women Reborn* reflects an ongoing collaboration among local Muslim women, Jewish Israeli feminists, and internationals.

Women Reborn illustrates one effort to construct conditions of “positive peace” in the context of an ongoing conflict. The concept of positive peace includes grassroots activities such as economic development, public health and advocacy that contribute to creating stable, just and peaceful societies.¹ Called “Track III” in the conflict resolution field, this approach reflects an understanding that the achievement of explicit peace building objectives and sustainable peace depend to a great extent on the context within which the peace building process occurs.²

Women Reborn illustrates some of the specific ways in which women make a unique contribution to peace building efforts. It highlights women’s ability to collaborate across religious or national divides, to use a position of marginalization as a positive tool for action, to focus on healing individuals and societies from the historical impact of violence, and to use religious identities and resources as a force for positive change.³

Methodology. Data reported in this case study were gathered by the author and colleagues over the past three years. Week-long site visits were made at the end of the first 12 months of the project and half-way through the third year. During the first site visit, structured interviews were conducted with the original 17 program participants, course instructors and consultants, and key community members, including the Mayor. In addition, site visitors observed several

¹ Marshall, K. & Hayward, S. (2011) *Women in Religious Peacebuilding*. *Peaceworks*, 71. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace.

² Richter-Devroe, S. (2008) *Gender, Culture, and Conflict Resolution in Palestine*. *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies*, 4(2). 30-59.

³ Marshall, K. & Hayward, S. (2011) *Women in Religious Peacebuilding*. *Peaceworks*, 71. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace.

sessions of the basic empowerment and Hebrew classes. During the second site visit, interviews were conducted with teachers and volunteers as well as several graduates and new participants. Vocational classes and potential marketing opportunities were observed, and site visitors participated in two group events. Discussions were also held with the management team and several course instructors about progress to date, emerging opportunities, and future plans. Regular Skype calls between the author and the management team were used between site visits to gather information about program activities. Data on program outcomes were collected by the management team. Annual reports to the Clark Trust, written by the author and the management team, provided a record of program activities, barriers encountered, and new directions taken.

Background and Context

Palestinians in Israel. Palestinian Israelis are an important and often overlooked group in the ongoing Palestinian/Israeli conflict. Currently numbering about 1.2 million and accounting for 20% of the Israeli population, they represent or are descended from the approximately 150,000 Palestinians who remained in Israel after 1948.⁴ As Muslims and Christians, they are in many ways second class citizens in a state where citizenship is mediated by religion, and most live in settings that maintain a high degree of separation from Israelis Jews.⁵ The structural, social and financial disparity between Palestinian and Jewish Israelis is a source of ongoing political tension. Structural barriers to equality include religiously based family courts, unequal public financing for municipal and social services, and legal restrictions on freedom of movement.⁶ In general, Jewish Israelis have more access to resources, power, and senior positions and also have a greater role in setting the cultural, religious and language norms of the country.⁷ This asymmetry or lack of equality between Jews and Arabs in Israel is often cited as a major barrier to peace, creating resentment among Palestinians and fears about the implications of changing demographics among Jewish Israelis.

After 60 years of struggle and 40 years of occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, Palestinian Israelis are essentially a “captured minority” living in a structural contradiction. They are impoverished and denied equal opportunities compared to Jewish Israelis, and are seen by many Israelis as “the enemy.” On the other hand, they are markedly better off than Palestinians in the occupied territories, to whom they are closely linked by family and history

⁴ Hermann, K. (2003) “They ask us to put our lives on hold . . .” The Palestinian Women’s Movement in Israel and the Challenge of Palestinian Identity Politics. *Orient*, 44(2), 205-227.

⁵ Touma-Sliman, A. (2002) Palestinian women in Israel. *New Humanist*, 117(2).

⁶ Hermann, K. (2003) “They ask us to put our lives on hold . . .” The Palestinian Women’s Movement in Israel and the Challenge of Palestinian Identity Politics. *Orient*, 44(2), 205-227.

⁷ Maoz, I. (2006) Dialogue and Social Justice in Workshops of Jews and Arabs in Israel. In M. Fitzduff and C.E. Stout, Eds., *The Psychology of Resolving Global Conflicts: From War to Peace. Volume 2: Group and Social Factors*. Westport, CT: Praeger.

but separated by national borders and political narratives.⁸ Palestinian Israeli women therefore contend with multiple and often conflicting identities based on gender, ethnicity, nationality, and religion.⁹

The Village of Fureidis. Fureidis (population 11,000) is a Muslim Palestinian village located in the southern part of the Galilee. Fureidis is a former seacoast fishing village that was forcibly relocated inland after the 1948 war. It is surrounded by Israeli Jewish towns and farmlands, although there are several smaller Arab villages in the vicinity. The Jewish town of Zichron Ya'akov, an affluent tourist town, looks down on the village from the nearby hillside – a common geographic and socio-political configuration in Israel and the occupied territories.

In a study comparing the socioeconomic status of all localities in Israel with more than 2,000 residents, Fureidis appeared in the third cluster from the bottom out of ten clusters.¹⁰ Unemployment is twice the national average, and 25% of all families receive welfare benefits. Fureidis has poor public transportation and huge infrastructure problems. The traditional livelihood of fishing is made difficult by distance from the ocean as well as the isolation of the village from mainstream Israeli markets. The center of the village is extremely congested, with roads barely wide enough for vehicles to pass and little room for expansion. Employment for men consists primarily of the construction trades or agricultural work at nearby farms.

For women, the situation is even more constrained. Fureidis is a “traditional” Muslim village where women generally marry at an early age, have large families, and rarely leave the village or socialize outside the “hamula” (patriarchal clan). While most have attended high school and have some exposure to Hebrew, few are fluent. Coupled with the discrimination they experience, this severely restricts both their desire and their ability to participate in mainstream Israeli society. While a small number of educated younger women have found jobs outside the village as teachers or social workers, few older women work outside the home. Those who do work tend to be employed as domestic help in Zichron Ya'akov. The situation for women in Fureidis is compounded by the traditional practice of newlyweds living with the husband's family. Brides from the occupied territories who have moved to Fureidis have never studied Hebrew, are not given Israeli citizenship, and do not qualify for benefits should their husbands die.

Women in Israel. Israel is in many ways a modern, affluent, Western country. Despite some significant differences, the history of the Jewish Israeli women's movement parallels the

⁸ Sa'ar, A. (2007) Contradictory Location: Assessing the Position of Palestinian Women Citizens of Israel. *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 3(3), 45-74.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Israel Central Bureau of Statistics (2006) Characterization and Classification of Local Authorities by the Socio-economic Level of the Population.

http://www.cbs.gov.il/www/publications/local_authorities06/local_authorities_e.htm

development of feminism in the United States.¹¹ The Palestinian women's movement in Israel also has historical roots that parallel the growth of feminism in the West, although it was not until the first Palestinian uprising in the occupied territories (1987-1993) that a feminist consciousness began to take hold among Palestinian women inside Israel. The relationship between Jewish and Palestinian feminists in Israel has from the beginning been complicated by political allegiances and the ongoing conflict.¹²

As a Jewish state, Israel is governed according to Orthodox Jewish law, and in family matters, other religious communities are governed by their respective religious courts. Female judges are excluded from working in religious courts in Israel, which effectively precludes women from influencing many of the matters that most affect them.¹³ As a result, attitudes towards women held by both Palestinian and Israeli men are influenced by extreme sectors of conservative Muslim and Orthodox Jewish society. Not only do many Israeli and Palestinian men believe that women are physically, spiritually and intellectually weaker, and that women's place is in the home,¹⁴ these attitudes hold additional sway due to the legal authority of conservative religious elements.

While there are many religious women (and men) of all faiths in Israel who hold very progressive views, daily activities in religious communities are often separated by gender. Religious peacemaking efforts are also generally gender-specific. In addition, as is common elsewhere,¹⁵ women involved in both formal and informal peacemaking activities are largely invisible. Janet Powers quotes a Palestinian woman: "In joint demonstrations, soldiers and police always arrest the men. It's as though the women are ghosts – they don't see us. They don't want to believe that we are capable of reaching across the barriers. They don't want to believe that we are working in politics and able to raise our voices."¹⁶ While there are religious women and groups involved in peace building in Israel and Palestine, the potential for women of faith to be a force for change has not been fully realized.

Women Reborn: A Social Empowerment Project for Palestinian Israeli Women

Program Approach. *Women Reborn* was started in 2008 by Ibtisam Mahameed, a local Muslim woman. Ibtisam was born in Fureidis, married a local man, and raised her family there.

¹¹ Freedman, M. (1990) *Exile in the Promised Land*. Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books.

¹² Hermann, K. (2003) "They ask us to put our lives on hold . . ." *The Palestinian Women's Movement in Israel and the Challenge of Palestinian Identity Politics*. *Orient*, 44(2), 205-227.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Powers, J.M. (2006) *Blossoms on the Olive Tree. Israeli and Palestinian Women Working for Peace*. Westport, CT: Praeger

¹⁵ Marshall, K. & Hayward, S. (2011) *Women in Religious Peacebuilding*. *Peaceworks*, 71. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace.

¹⁶ Ibid, p.135.

Although she had not been able to pursue her dream of higher education, over the years she had been involved with women's activities and interfaith peace efforts outside the village. When the chance arose to develop a program in Fureidis, she didn't hesitate. Ibtisam brings to the project a strong personal faith and identity as a Muslim, extensive experience with interfaith activities, a natural belief in the power and capacity of women, an international network of social activists and religious peace builders, and extensive local knowledge and connections within Fureidis.

From the beginning, *Women Reborn* has been a team effort. The project received an initial three-year grant from the *Clark Charitable Trust* in England, and receives ongoing help with grant writing and evaluation from the *Center for Religious Tolerance*, a US-based nonprofit organization. The initial curriculum was designed with assistance from *Givat Haviva*, a nearby Center for Israeli/Palestinian Coexistence. Grants are administered through *Shin*, the Israeli movement for equal representation of women, and several Shin women volunteer their time to help with planning, resource development and networking. *Shin* is in the forefront of struggles for equal representation of women in politics and in all public and economic spheres of life in Israel, and their participation ensures that a political lens is present. While the teachers in the program are local Arab women, Ibtisam has recruited dozens of volunteers - including Israeli Jews and internationals of all faiths - to help with various aspects of the project.

Women Reborn was developed implicitly on a feminist model. The operating definition of "empowerment" emphasized access to control over resources, the ability to exercise choices, a shift in power in both personal and public domains, and an overtly political agenda. Ibtisam and the other team members envisioned the women of Fureidis, as Mosedale describes, "achieving a change that expands options not only for themselves but for women in general both now and in the future."¹⁷

From the start, the program emphasized respect for cultural and religious norms. As a religious Muslim woman, Ibtisam understood that the major potential barrier to success of the program in Fureidis was for it to be identified as "western," "secular," or in any way anti-Islamic. She took care to reassure the women and their families that the project respected traditional culture, and to work within existing norms. While tensions between local cultural norms and empowerment emerged during the first year (see below), the project has been able to negotiate these tensions without sacrificing either.

Women Reborn also emphasized the value of voice and local control. Both Jewish Israeli and international members of the development team recognized the importance of staying "in the

¹⁷ Mosedale, S. (2005) Assessing Women's Empowerment: Towards a Conceptual Framework. *Journal of International Development*, 17, 252.

background,” and while Ibtisam had a clear idea of how the program should develop, she kept the program as flexible as possible to allow for changes guided by the participants. The Clark foundation was extremely supportive of this approach. “Voice” has been defined in the literature as the ability to express an opinion, coupled with the realization that you have the right to do so. The establishment of voice is directly relevant both to women’s empowerment and to peace building. It is a key part of identity, and is also one of most important aspects of procedural justice - the feeling that you’ve been treated fairly – and to interrupting cycles of violence.¹⁸ A commitment to formative evaluation was established in the program principles to provide an ongoing mechanism for listening to participants and incorporating their feedback into program activities.

In the beginning, *Women Reborn* had 3 stated objectives: 1) to assist women to develop the skills to become more independent and to increase their level of economic self-sufficiency; 2) to develop an ongoing support network of Palestinian women; and 3) to train a group of women leaders who could expand the program to additional towns and villages. Participants ranged in age from early 20’s to mid-50’s. Most were married with children, although a few were single or divorced or raising children alone. Most had limited education (elementary school or some high school), while a few had completed some college. The original curriculum was designed to move from a focus on the individual, to the family, and then to the community. The first six months of the program dealt with issues of individual growth and empowerment, communication and relationship issues, and family dynamics. The second six months focused on rights, group process and community building, including planning and implementing community service projects. Field trips to women’s groups and conferences were designed to connect participants with the larger women’s movement in Israel. However, while the underlying structure of the curriculum has remained intact over its three years of existence, the program expanded in ways that were completely unanticipated at the start.

Year I. Start-Up: Consciousness-raising, Skills Building, Political Empowerment. The initial 17 participants were recruited using local advertising and personal outreach by the project director, reassuring families that the program was not risky in any way. Although the project began with a defined curriculum, it quickly became clear that the women didn’t really understand what they were there for, and lacked the self-confidence necessary to move through the program. There were concerns about gossip and confidentiality, which led to a discussion about respect, trust and betrayal, the importance of taking responsibility for one’s own words, and what it feels like to do something outside of accepted community norms. The women also seemed unable to set goals for themselves – rather, they talked about the program

¹⁸ D’Estree, T.P. (2006) The Role of Voice in Intergroup Conflict De-escalation and Resolution. In M. Fitzduff and C.E. Stout, Eds., *The Psychology of Resolving Global Conflicts: From War to Peace. Volume 3: Interventions*. Westport, CT: Praeger.

in terms of how it would help their husbands or their sons. When made aware of this pattern, the women began to realize that they had been trained to “make themselves small, to stay in the background,” and that they were bringing up their children in the same way. As one woman said: “We send our sons to their father to ask permission - he holds the key, the power - and eventually they learn to push their mother aside. When they get married, they act the same way (with their wives).” In the following weeks, the women came to recognize how they had been limiting their expectations for themselves and their girls. By the end of the first three months, each woman was able to state that she *herself* was worthy of having a goal, and was able to set a goal for her own life.

As they started setting goals for themselves, the women began to identify concrete skills needed to move forward. Many felt their lack of Hebrew was the primary barrier to getting jobs or participating in Israeli public life. Additional funds were obtained from the Clark Trust, and 12 women began taking Hebrew in addition to the empowerment course. Significant attention was paid to communication skills, both for developing the women’s own potential and for handling relationships within family and community. Learning to negotiate with their husbands in decision-making was important for many. As one woman stated, “We learned to grow with our families rather than against them.” For other participants, relationships with women in the extended family were very sensitive. Several of the women didn’t tell their sisters or sisters-in-law about their participation in the program until almost half-way through the year. Finding ways to talk about their experience with their families was critical to the women and key to maintaining support for the program.

During this period, the issue of the women’s relationship with their religion also arose. Virtually all of the participants were observant Muslims, and many wondered how their “empowerment” comported with Islam. One woman mused, “I felt like I was becoming a better Muslim – the Prophet talked about being educated and helping others. But I was doing things I had been told good Muslim women didn’t do. I couldn’t figure it out.” Guest speakers were brought in who helped them to discern between the true message of the Qu’ran and cultural patterns that served to maintain the dominance of men. The process of renegotiating their religious identity – and helping their families to come to a new understanding of the position of women in Islam – was an ongoing process.

A major challenge during this period involved a backlash from some men in the community. While initially supportive of the program (even making space available at no cost), community leaders became increasingly resistant as the program gained momentum. The women told stories of being locked out of the meeting space, not being allowed to have their own keys, not being given enough chairs, having the blackboard removed and not returned, and being criticized for disrupting prayers in the mosque next door. These instances were used as

“learning opportunities” to discuss how doing things counter to cultural norms engenders resistance. The women remained firm, gaining self confidence each time they had to confront one of the public leaders and demand a change.

A second challenge arose from the women’s desire to work. The nearby Israeli Jewish town of Zichron Yaakov provided the only viable source of employment. However, there is significant discrimination against Arabs throughout Israel, especially in the rural areas. Even with improved Hebrew, the women felt they would not be accepted for jobs in public situations. When several expressed interest in working at the supermarket, the management team arranged to meet with the owner and secure his support for hiring the women. This set the stage for serious consideration of vocational programming.

By November, the participants in *Women Reborn* were beginning to understand their collective power. As their class project, the women decided to get involved in the local mayoral election (two weeks after the presidential election in the US). They hosted a candidates’ forum on women’s issues, and 300 hundred women turned out. They organized a grassroots campaign for the most “women-friendly” candidate, complete with campaign posters and a phone bank and a door to door campaign encouraging women to vote. Against significant odds (the 25-year incumbent was widely favored) the “women’s candidate” won. For virtually all of the women, this was the first time they had been involved in political activities. Even the fact that the women decided who to vote for was significant, since within traditional Arab culture, women are expected to vote with their husband and their *hamula*.

Year 2. Expansion: Employment, Education, Participation. During Year 2, the program grew from one empowerment class of 17 women with supplemental Hebrew instruction to 13 classes serving 184 women. Classes included basic empowerment; advanced empowerment (leadership); basic, intermediate and advanced Hebrew; basic and advanced computer skills; English; and two prevocational training courses (glass painting and confectionary.) While some women continued to seek jobs outside the village, others focused on returning to school to prepare for higher level jobs, and others expressed a desire to learn basic business skills in order to set up small businesses in the village, and plans were made to address these needs.

Year 2 also saw a major expansion in the level of social participation. Several field trips to women’s conferences during the first year had exposed participants to the larger women’s movement in Israel, and the successful venture into political organizing had begun to draw national attention. The importance of networking with other women was becoming clear, and in Year 2, *Women Reborn* joined with *Shin* to organize a “Women’s Parliament” on the issue of early marriages in Orthodox Jewish and conservative Muslim societies. The event, which was held in Fureidis, was a huge success, with over 150 Jewish and Muslim men and women attending to hear a panel of women and religious leaders discussing their perspectives on the

issue. This event solidified the women's belief that religious divides could be transcended to address issues of mutual concern.

The new mayor publicly acknowledged the role of women in his political success, and took steps to deliver on his campaign promises. In March, 2009, at the graduation ceremony of the first *Women Reborn* class, he announced plans to establish a Women's Division within the municipal government, with a budget and paid director - the first such Division to be established in an Arab municipality and the second anywhere in Israel. The Mayor's support was a sign that women's influence within the public sphere was increasing. The program was also gaining international attention. In the spring, Ibtisam was named a "Hero of Compassion" by the Dalai Lama, and she and her husband flew to San Francisco to receive the award. At the same time, the women's efforts were beginning to yield both economic and social benefits to the community, and the initial resistance from men in the village decreased accordingly.

Year 3. Institutionalization: Acceptance, Integration, Outreach. In Year 3, Women Reborn conducted a total of 11 classes reaching 240 women. Personal coaching, small business entrepreneurship, and expanded prevocational offerings (fashion design, mosaics, and ceramics) were added to the existing curriculum. Classes were offered on an exploratory basis in two nearby towns. Within Fureidis, the program began to draw a wider diversity of women, including women with higher levels of education and socioeconomic status, and for the first time, several women who were not religious. This greater diversity was due in part to the positive local, national and international attention the project was getting, and in part to the new opportunities that were opening up for women and for the village.

Year 3 saw the project achieve significant community acceptance and support. The Mayor succeeded in allocating municipal funds to support a women's service coordinator, continue *Women Reborn* classes after the end of the Clark Trust grant, and establish a scholarship fund for women to pursue higher education (to be supplemented by private donations). He also designated an entire floor of the new community center for women's activities. *Women Reborn* also continued to actively engage the larger community. A community lecture on the role of women in the Qu'ran was attended by over 40 community members, and a celebration of International Women's Day organized by *Women Reborn* participants drew hundreds of local women and men. A special demonstration of Arab cooking, hosted by the chef who had been teaching the baking class (with Ibtisam as co-chef), brought over 30 Jewish Israeli "foodies" to town - none of whom had ever been in an Arab village before. They shopped in village stores, learned to cook Arab-style, and chopped, diced, stirred, mixed and feasted alongside women from the program and other residents of Fureidis.

During Year 3, *Women Reborn* began tackling more controversial issues, including violence against women. Political networking also continued to grow. Several dozen women from

Fureidis joined 250 Arab women from across the country at a conference on Bedouin rights in Nazareth; almost 100 took a day trip to Bethlehem (in the West Bank); and almost 50 attended a feminist conference in Tel Aviv where they joined hundreds of Jewish, Muslim, Christian and Druze Israeli women in taking a stand for the rights of immigrant women laborers.

The program's success continued to garner significant national and international attention. Ibtisam was featured in a documentary video and a short film on *Women Reborn* was produced by an international women's film project. Most importantly, perhaps, the project and Ibtisam's leadership was recognized for the first time by Palestinians in the West Bank. In the fall of 2010, she was named "Palestinian Woman of the Year" – the first time this award had been given to an Israeli Palestinian woman.

Plans for Coming Years. The basic *Women Reborn* program in Fureidis is established and sustainable, with municipal funds supporting a part-time women's service coordinator and essential project costs. External funds are currently being sought to further expand the project in Fureidis and to begin new programs in 3 nearby Arab villages. The new sites are even more economically and socially disadvantaged than Fureidis, including one village that is widely considered to be the most troubled municipality in Israel, with rampant illiteracy, endemic social and health problems, and the lowest income and highest high school drop-out rate of all Palestinian Israeli towns and villages. Municipal authorities and women of the three villages have already expressed their support for the project.

Impact of the Project

In the past three years, *Women Reborn* has served over 250 women in empowerment, skills training, and vocational courses. An estimated 1,500 women have participated in community events, field trips, lectures, and community organizing activities in Fureidis and in two neighboring villages. In evaluating the impact of the program, we followed feminist conceptions of empowerment¹⁹ and examined outcomes in both private and public domains. We also considered the impact of the program on the community of Fureidis and on elements of the larger society, including the Israeli women's movement.

Impact on Participants and their Families. It is evident that the women have increased in self confidence, ability to participate in domestic decision making, independence, and personal mobility. When the project began, the director had to recruit participants by going door to door and reassuring husbands that their wives would not be exposed to dangerous influences. Few women had ever worked outside the home, traveled without their husbands or families, or

¹⁹ Lingam, L. (2007) Domains of Empowerment: Women in Micro-Credit Groups Negotiating with Multiple Patriarchies. In Elliott, C.M (Ed.) *Global Empowerment of Women: Response to Globalization and Politicized Religion*. London: Routledge, 119-137.

had close friendships with women outside their extended families. Three years later there is a waiting list for the program, graduates are taking on leadership responsibilities, and women throughout the village eagerly anticipate opportunities to participate in field trips and group activities. The program has become a community-wide support network, providing a safety net for women in vulnerable circumstances. For example, one woman (the wife of a high municipal official) related that she is divorcing her husband because he refused to allow her to become more independent. She stated, "I can only do this because I know that *Women Reborn* is there to support me, and the women will not let me fall." Participants have also become more comfortable with their identities as Muslims and as active, independent women. To our knowledge, no woman has rejected her faith as a result of participating in the program. Rather, they have re-interpreted their understanding of Islam to support their new social identities. As one woman said at the end of the first year, "The most important thing I learned this year is that I can be a good Muslim woman and a feminist too!"

Of the 250 women directly involved in the project, 30 are now working in industry, 15 in other blue-collar jobs, and 10 have started small businesses or are in the process. In addition, the program has secured several venues for selling products made by the women, which is supplying a small income to several dozen more women. A total of 11 women have gone back to school to pursue higher education and 16 are waiting for scholarships in order to enroll. Several dozen are working on the matriculation exams that would make it possible for them to continue their studies.

Husbands and families have also undergone a transformation. Initial skepticism and resistance on the part of husbands and sons was replaced by support and pride as women began bringing income into the family and gaining positive attention for their efforts. Daughters are setting new goals for themselves, and many are beginning to participate along with their mothers in program activities. For example, several girls have been attending art classes and have discovered that they have significant artistic potential. Many other female relatives, who were initially among those most critical of the program, have begun to get involved in community activities.

Impact on Fureidis and Surrounding Communities. *Women Reborn* has started to have an economic and social impact on the wider community. With their successful foray into electoral politics at the end of the first year, the women established themselves as a force for change. Each class has tackled at least one community problem - from establishing daycare to developing a summer camp for children - that has improved the quality of life for everyone. In large measure due to the success of the program and to the availability of women as a potential workforce, Fureidis has been designated as an official "Tourist Site" by the Ministry of Tourism, opening the village up to economic development opportunities. The exposure of the program

to outsiders, including both Israelis and internationals, also appears to have had an impact on community perceptions of the program and of women in general. The Mayor was proud of the fact that his story – and his picture – was on the *Center for Religious Tolerance* website, and he made sure to tell everyone he could about it. The success of the program has also created a great deal of interest in other communities. In the past year, the elected officials of five surrounding Arab municipalities have approached the director to discuss the possibility of replicating the project. Each has promised to provide space and other in-kind support to the project.

Impact on Israeli Society. While there is no way to measure the impact of *Women Reborn* on Israeli society as a whole, it is clear that it is having an impact on the Israeli women's movement. The women of Fureidis have greatly increased their visibility and participation in women's activities across the country, and have begun to play leadership roles outside their own community. *Shin* has plans to re-invigorate *Anuar*, their joint Israeli-Palestinian women's leadership program that had been inactive for a number of years.

There are also initial indications of a wider impact. *Women Reborn* has increased Interaction between Jewish and Palestinian Israelis in a number of ways. In addition to the direct activities of the project, a number of spin-off ventures have occurred. For example, one of the younger graduates of *Women Reborn* and the son of one of the Jewish Israeli advisors (both teachers) have recently started the first-ever interfaith windsurfing program for youth in Israel. Commerce between Fureidis and Zichron Ya'akov has increased, and the possibility of marketing Fureidis products in other nearby Jewish towns is being explored. There is also a possibility emerging that the program could become a national model. At least one member of the Knesset has taken a personal interest in the project, and the Israeli Minister of Economic Development has recently made economic empowerment of Palestinian Israeli women one of his top policy priorities.

Discussion, Implications, and Further Questions

Discussion. By all measures, *Women Reborn* has been a successful project. The leadership of the director, Ibtisam Mahameed, was undoubtedly a major factor. However, the success of similar projects in other parts of the world suggests that this is not the whole story. Homa Hoodfar describes an educational movement among Afghani refugee women in Iran in the 1990's where tens of thousands of Afghani children (and adults) were educated in schools started and run by women.²⁰ Although the context was very different, there were several similarities between this movement and *Women Reborn*. First, it was a grassroots effort, unlike

²⁰ Hoodfar, H. (2007) Women, Religion and the "Afghan Education Movement" in Iran. *Journal of Development Studies*, 43(2), 265-293.

what Hoodfar describes as “previous top-down Afghan government policies,” “elite-based movements” or “transplanted international agencies’ programs.” Second, the movement started with basic education among an impoverished rural sector of Afghan society, and ended up transforming gender roles in ways that few could have predicted. Third, the women came to believe that what they were doing was completely consistent with their Muslim beliefs. In fact, Hoodfar notes that one of the most remarkable elements of the process was “the appropriation by these Afghan women of the principles and language of Islam – a rhetoric that for centuries excluded them from participating in public life – to achieve change (p.274).

Like the Afghan education movement, *Women Reborn* was structured and financed to maximize flexibility and local control rather than to follow a pre-determined model. The program was based on the premise that the most important untapped resource in the community was the women themselves. It responded to the issues identified by the community as their priorities, and allowed more controversial issues, such as violence against women, to emerge as people were ready to address them. Similarly, the role of international involvement was primarily to support, acknowledge and document the wisdom and efforts of the local actors.

Also similar to the Afghan education movement, *Women Reborn* was grounded in the values and practices of Islam – but an Islam that had been re-examined and re-interpreted. The process that the women in Fureidis went through of examining their religious beliefs is an example of what Monica Maher refers to as “questioning the unquestionable.”²¹ Maher suggests that when women realize that what had never had been questioned before is open to interpretation, “the whole world opens up,” and their own “perspectives, voices and experiences – indeed their entire lives, become important again in their eyes.” She notes that “by challenging what they had been taught as final and absolute truth about female nature and the historical religious tradition, women often begin to question authorities, finding their voices in political activism toward justice for women.”

Maher describes a program operated by the Mercy Sisters in Honduras where the women went through a process of re-examining their Christian beliefs that was similar in many ways to what happened in *Women Reborn*. She recounts that the process left some of the women “a bit shell shocked, rudderless, because what they believed to be so certain was seen suddenly as contingent and open for interpretation like all other human teachings.” Yet through a process of retreats and workshops, the women began listening to their own wisdom and intuition. Eventually they realized that “no one person or institution holds the absolute truth, but that

²¹ Maher, M. (2007) *The Truth Will Set Us Free. Religion, Violence and Women’s Empowerment in Latin America*. In C.M. Elliott (Ed.) *Global Empowerment of Women: Responses to Globalization and Politicized Religion*. London: Routledge, pp 265-84.

truth emerges through a group discernment process based on their own experiences and realities – a collective wisdom.” This process of religious re-examination was clearly not the only factor leading the women of Fureidis towards new goals and new perspectives – their political and economic empowerment were also critical. Nonetheless, it is a particular important variable to consider when working in the arena of religious peace building.

Implications for Peace Building. The *Women Reborn* program has a number of direct implications for the development of sustainable peace in Israel and Palestine. First, it addresses one of the primary injustices in Israeli society, the unequal distribution of resources. Theidon notes that “injustice is a *felt* grievance.” In her post-conflict reconciliation work in Peru, the alleviation of poverty was frequently mentioned as one of the factors that could make a difference.²² The reduction of economic disparities between Jewish and Palestinian Israelis will be critical to sustainable reconciliation.

Women Reborn also works to create trust and empathy between Israeli Jewish and Palestinian women. Trust, empathy/bonding, dependence/vulnerability, and integrity/reliability have been recognized as critical to functional cooperation between states.²³ Clearly, these factors are largely absent in the current policy environment in Israel and Palestine, although examples of each can be found in the long history of negotiations. However, even if the properties of trust could be realized at the level of leaders, the question would remain “can they become embedded at the intersocietal level? Might powerful feelings and forces at the societal level indefinitely postpone trust becoming embedded?”²⁴ Booth and Wheeler note that deep divisions on both sides of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict regarding the trustworthiness of the other have left most negotiated agreements easily exploited. Similarly, symmetry between partners is a key to reconciliation,²⁵ and the relationship between Israel and Palestine is a very asymmetrical one. By building relationships and seeking to establish equality between Jewish and Palestinian Israeli women (and their families) *Women Reborn* has begun to address these issues.

Finally, *Women Reborn* has the potential to increase the participation of Palestinian Israeli women in peace building. Clearly, the women of Fureidis have found their voice. Many have

²² Theidon, K. (2006) *Intimate Enemies: Toward a Social Psychology of Reconciliation*. In M. Fitzduff & C.E. Stout (Eds.) *The Psychology of Resolving Conflicts: From War to Peace. Volume 2: Group and Social Factors*. Westport, CT: Praeger.

²³ Booth, K. & Wheeler, N.J. (2008) *The Security Dilemma. Fear, Cooperation and Trust in World Politics*. NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

²⁴ Booth, K. & Wheeler, N.J. (2008) *The Security Dilemma. Fear, Cooperation and Trust in World Politics*. NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

²⁵ Maoz, I. (2006) *Dialogue and Social Justice in Workshops of Jews and Arabs in Israel*. In M. Fitzduff and C.E. Stout, Eds., *The Psychology of Resolving Global Conflicts: From War to Peace. Volume 2: Group and Social Factors*. Westport, CT: Praeger.

already assumed the mantle of “social activist” and have seen the power of joining forces with their Jewish Israeli sisters to combat injustice. The possibility that some of these women will go on to formal leadership positions is good. In fact, Ibtisam has already been approached several times as a possible candidate for the Knesset.

Tamra d’Estree points out that the loss of voice, defined as “the ability to tell one’s story, to narrate one’s own version of meaning to personal or collective experience,” is one of the hallmarks of oppression and often underlies violence.²⁶ Regaining one’s voice is not only essential to personal trauma healing, it is essential in healing larger social conflicts. Victims in conflicts are often silenced and forgetting promoted by the party in power, at least in part to undermine credibility. To the extent that Palestinian women can regain their sense of personal voice, they will be better positioned to participate in creating and maintaining the collective Palestinian narrative. Without that narrative being recognized, sustainable peace is unlikely.

Remaining Questions. Several interesting and important questions emerge from this case study. First, does the experience of the women in the program suggest that an interfaith women’s peace movement might be possible in Israel? Although the program has clearly been successful in bringing Jewish and Palestinian Israeli women together – both religious and secular - in the context of women’s issues, the question of whether this relationship could transition to more contentious and politically charged issues is more vexed. The “feminist project” has often been criticized for assuming that bonds between women can overcome political differences,²⁷ and the Israeli and Palestinian women’s movements have been affected by sixty years of more or less constant conflict. However, *Women Reborn* successfully weathered several major political conflicts and outbreaks of violence during its three years, including the invasion of Lebanon, the bombing of Gaza, and the “flotilla incident,” apparently largely through a tacit agreement not to let politics derail their efforts. The project director has extensive experience in interfaith peace building, and *Shin* has a long track record of successful political organizing. It is possible that with support, they could move towards development of a model of collaborative peace building. Sharoni points out that developing meaningful relationships with women “on the other side of the political divide” requires that the women who are part of the more powerful group be willing to lose their power and privilege and to address the underlying legacy of colonialism.²⁸ It also requires the women with less objective power to find other ways to balance the equation, and to reject a stance of victimhood. The

²⁶ D’Estree, T.P. (2006) The Role of Voice in Intergroup Conflict De-escalation and Resolution. In M. Fitzduff and C.E. Stout, Eds., *The Psychology of Resolving Global Conflicts: From War to Peace. Volume 3: Interventions*. Westport, CT: Praeger.

²⁷ Richter-Devroe, S. (2008) Gender, Culture and Conflict Resolution in Palestine. *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies*, 4(2), 30-59.

²⁸ Sharoni, S. (2001) Rethinking Women’s Struggles in Israel-Palestine and in the North of Ireland. In C. Moser and F. Clark (Eds.) *Victims, Perpetrators or Actors: Gender, Armed Conflict and Political Violence*. London: Zed.

religious faith of the women involved in the program is one possible source of such strength. *Women Reborn* has recently become a “cooperation circle” in the *United Religions Initiative*, which will put them into ongoing discussion with hundreds of interfaith peace groups. This may prove to be a platform on which this possibility can be tested.

Second, is there a possibility of linking the women of *Women Reborn* with their sisters in the occupied territories? The Palestinian women’s movement in the West Bank and Gaza developed in part out of resistance to the occupation during the first Intifada, and feminism and nationalism developed simultaneously. Collaboration with Israelis, even in a project of such clear mutuality as *Women Reborn*, is fraught with difficulties for women in the occupied territories. Richter-Devroe quotes a Palestinian woman: “I see it from a national perspective. We’re suffering here, men and women both. How can I say these Israeli women soldiers at the checkpoint are my sisters?”²⁹ Nonetheless, there are women’s empowerment projects scattered across the West Bank and Gaza that concentrate, like *Women Reborn*, on *practical* gender interests – access to childcare, healthcare, employment, etc – rather than *strategic* gender interests which seek directly to change gender roles.³⁰ These empowerment programs could potentially form a bridge to bring women together across the national divide.

Finally, what does the experience of *Women Reborn* suggest for gender relationships and the participation of Palestinian women in the Israeli peace movement? Hermann reminds us that the current situation of Palestinians in Israel profoundly affects gender relationships, creating a circle of oppression and co-optation that “keeps Palestinian society traditional and thus easier for Israel to control.” She quotes Nabila Espanioly: “Having lost control over their land and status for both the present and the future, the Palestinian man was left with only one domain over which to exert control: his family, wife and children.”³¹ It appears that *Women Reborn* is having a positive impact on gender relationships within Fureidis and the surrounding communities. Further research is needed to determine whether this will translate into meaningful empowerment for both Palestinian men and women. If so, it might also lead to greater participation in peace building activities. Up until now, religious Palestinian women have been scarce in the Israeli peace movement. It is possible that programs like *Women Reborn* could change that.

²⁹ Richter-Devroe, S. (2008) Gender, Culture and Conflict Resolution in Palestine. *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies*, 4(2), 30-59.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Hermann, K. (2003) “They ask us to put our lives on hold . . .” The Palestinian Women’s Movement in Israel and the Challenge of Palestinian Identity Politics. *Orient*, 44(2), 205-227.