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Middle East peace effort's missing key: female negotiators.

## **Women bear the brunt of conflict, so their input for peace is essential.**

By Rachel Brown

*MEDFORD, MASS.*

While Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and representatives of the Middle East Quartet debate whether evictions of Palestinian families are a barrier or catalyst to a two-state solution, Israeli and Palestinian women alike confront the realities of the conflict on the ground.

These women work toward a sustainable peace as committee members, as demonstrators, and as mothers raising and educating their children despite occupation. But their representation in formal negotiations is inadequate.

Because Israeli and Palestinian women are disproportionately affected by occupation and the threat of violence, their input into the national security debate – and international negotiations for peace – is essential.

On the Palestinian side, occupation increases women's exposure to violence not only while traveling to various locations, but also at home.

Consider the story of Maha, a Palestinian woman living next to the wall separating Israel from the West Bank. Before the wall, Maha was able to travel without problem to the village of Al Ram, where she taught mathematics, according to the Jerusalem Center for Women. But now, the potential for harassment at checkpoints is the norm. Because of that, she no longer travels at all and can no longer bring home the income from her job. This in turn diminishes her family's economic security.

Though men face economic hardship as well, the threat of gender-based harassment can mean increased restrictions on women's movement, and hindered access to jobs, healthcare, and education. Because women are often the care-takers, a danger that requires a child to stay inside the house means diminished educational and economic opportunity for mothers and sisters, in addition to increased psychological and emotional stress.

For other women, the economic hardship experienced by men due to the occupation correlates with increased levels of domestic violence, as Amnesty International reports. Additionally, the numerous roadblocks and restrictions on movement mean women may have difficulty physically getting to remote family and friends to seek psychological support after they experience domestic violence.

In Israel, too, increased levels of militarization and violence have affected women disproportionately, particularly in poor and marginalized communities. As in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, increased violence among men – as seen among Israeli army combatants during intensified military operations – can mean the home becomes more tumultuous and emotionally stressful, increasing the probability of domestic violence.

Along national borders as well, poor women feel the greatest burden of rocket attacks. During the 2006 Second Lebanon War in northern Israel, women received little assistance from the Israeli government in the aftermath of Hezbollah rocket attacks, according to the Mahut Center in Haifa.

Because many poverty stricken women lost jobs during the war, the lack of government compensation for forgone wages led to a widening of the economic gap between men and women. Higher unemployment, compounded with the emotional burden of caring for children out of school meant increased reports of trauma and despair among women, according to the center.

The suffering that women face under increased militarization should translate into a large presence in the security sector. But the Haifa Feminist Center reports that men are overwhelmingly the central decisionmakers in matters of formal conflict resolution, while female politicians largely address socioeconomic issues within the "private" sphere.

This lack of entrenched female involvement is partly due to the use of army rank as a criterion for promotions within the security sector. To be sure, varying perceptions of the role women should play in Israeli and Palestinian societies and within the family, while nuanced and never monolithic, also play a role.

But using army rank as a way to promote leadership in the security sector means that women rarely become central players in issues of national defense, even though they may have a more acute sense of the disproportionate effect of violence on women.

Knowing intimately how civilians on the ground suffer during armed conflict – and who bears the largest burden of violence – is key to designing defense policies that do not exacerbate the enemy's determination. Many women have this very information because they are the ones taking care of the injured, raising children by themselves when husbands are in combat, and sacrificing their jobs and economic security when there are increased restrictions on freedom of movement, or when rocket attacks prevent children from attending school.

For years, women's organizations in Israel and Palestine have worked to increase female participation in the peace process. Groups like the Haifa Feminist Center have organized conferences and lobbied legislators, while the Palestinian section of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom

has met with Palestinian leadership about increasing the number of high-level posts held by women.

Such grass-roots efforts should be supported and recognized by US diplomats and the Obama administration, both politically and financially.

One simple step for major players to take could be to facilitate increased information-sharing between these organizations, the Israeli government, the Palestinian Authority, and members of the Quartet. That alone could bring a spotlight to this issue.

Of course, women cannot magically wave a wand and transform the Israeli-Palestinian discourse on security into a conversation about human rights and needs. This transformation must include male and female politicians alike, so that defense analysts understand why the safety of women in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood of Jerusalem and Al Ram and Ashkelon vitally affects policy. To begin, a greater number of women must get to the negotiation table.

Until the debate includes further talk of individual economic, educational, and physical safety alongside discussions of borders, weapons, and power politics, delegates like those visiting the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood in protest of recent evictions will not fully understand the root causes of conflict

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