

Column: Sending a life-line to women who survive war

BY YVONNE ZACHARIAS, VANCOUVER SUN SEPTEMBER 25, 2009



Zainab Salbi with Women for Women International participants in Rwanda. Salbi is an Iraqi American writer, activist and social entrepreneur who is co-founder and president for Women for Women International.

Photograph by: Handout, ..

One voice. Sometimes that is all it takes to change the world.

Zainab Salbi, an Iraqi American, was a mere 24-year-old when she became that voice. The horror of the rape camps in the former Yugoslavia convinced her she could not remain silent.

At that time, she was sure there had to be an organization somewhere that could help all those women who were being subjected to such brutality. She searched everywhere but could find none.

So Salbi started one. Now, as the writer, activist and social entrepreneur is on the cusp of turning 40, her organization, Women for Women International, has helped around 200,000 women and their 800,000 children in war-torn countries around the world.

Its concept is simple but effective. It pairs female survivors of war with a “sister” in a more stable part of the world who provides \$27 a month in financial support and a whole lot of love in messages.

The organization also works in the field seeking macro solutions to the world’s problems and helping women to learn their rights and how to become leaders.

Of late, Women to Women International has been trying to find ways of helping women in war-ravaged countries to improve their economic status in significant ways rather than seeing them continue down the path of earning just petty cash, Salbi said in a recent interview from the U.S.

Women make up 70 per cent of the world's farmers and produce 80 per cent of the food, yet they own only two per cent of the world's land. Salbi's organization is providing women in countries like Rwanda and Sudan training, tools and resources such as seeds, fertilizer and land that it is leasing in partnership with local governments and communities.

During her 16-year mission, it is her encounters with women that have kept her going. She told a story about a widow she met in Iraq.

"She was cooking lunch. Her husband and four kids went outside and were hit by a missile. Her husband was killed and her four sons were injured. She had no money and lived in a two-room house."

The woman could have chosen to give up, to become a victim. Instead, she decided she had to stand on her own two feet and help herself. She learned nursing skills to save on health-care costs and set up a store next to her house where she and her four boys could take turns working. At the same time, she makes sure the boys go to school. And she is producing candles for an American company.

It was "her beautiful spirit" that moved Salbi.

While her organization has tossed a lifeline to so many women, the world still seems immune to their plight. Between 75 and 80 per cent of the world's refugees are women and children. Ninety per cent of war casualties are civilians, of whom 80 per cent are women and children. Rape is still very much tolerated as a weapon of war, said Salbi, praising U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's recent visit to the Congo and Clinton's condemnation of widespread rape in that country.

In films, in books and in the minds of the masses, war is seen as a bloody battle on the front lines with soldiers, guns and bombs. But behind those lines lie the stories of women trying to keep life going in the rubble. Salbi wants the world to see war through the eyes of those women.

For someone who has witnessed so much tragedy, she sounds upbeat over the phone. The founder and CEO of Women to Women International, who divides her time between New York City and Washington where the organization has an office, is friendly, articulate and laughs a lot while being passionate about her message.

Much has changed for her in recent years. Fifteen years ago, her marriage to Amjad Atallah, a Palestinian-American, was a much-celebrated event, with the story being told over and over of how the couple eschewed a honeymoon in order to help the women in the rape camps in the former Yugoslavia.

Three years ago, Salbi and Atallah split up although she said they remain very good friends and still have a deep love for each other. She said this with no tone of regret. It's just that her work is her passion and her first love.

Her perspective has also changed. She said she used to take herself so seriously but she has learned from women around the world how to dance, how to see light in the darkness, how to see beauty in the

ruins.

“I still cry a lot but I am blessed to have friends and a loving family.”

Through it all, Salbi has received a precious gift that is denied to so many. It is the knowledge that if her life is snatched away from at moment, drop by drop, piece by piece, woman to woman, she will have made a difference.

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For more information, check out www.womenforwomen.org.

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