

American Organization Brings Women Together to Build Peace

February 8, 2006



Group photo of women leaders who participated in the Initiative for Inclusive Security Colloquium which this year focused on Rule of Law

By Faiza Elmasry
Washington, D.C.

Even if they don't carry guns, women in war zones around the world pay the high cost of armed conflicts. They witness the loss of family members. They struggle to support their children and sustain life in their communities under dangerous conditions. But they can also lead their countries to peace and post-conflict reconciliation. A group of these extraordinary women have recently met and shared their experiences on rebuilding lives.

Like many Afghani women who grew up away of their homeland, Zohra Rasekh doesn't have many memories of her childhood in Kabul. However, she says she has always felt connected to Afghanistan.

"I went back the first time in 1996," she says. "I finished my graduate school and wanted to go and see the situation of women, specifically refugees. I sneaked in through the borders from Pakistan for one week."

When Ms. Rasekh went back again, more than three years ago, she stayed. She now serves as , helping Afghani women regain what was taken away from them by the Taleban a decade ago: their basic rights in education, public health and employment.

"Women regained all these rights plus more," she says. "Women are more into the political arena. They are more active. We have many women in the parliament, women in the government and in the private sector. But the situation of most women outside Kabul and other big cities --in

rural areas -- remains the same with one exception. They are not systematically abused and imprisoned at home."

But Ms. Rasekh says helping Afghani women exercise their rights and become socially and politically active citizens takes more than new laws and a new constitution. "Most of the population follows the customary laws. So the customary laws and the traditions are taking the place of the formal laws," she says. "So we need to get our men educated about the rights of women. We need to get men to support women' s rights."

Legislation supporting women' s rights has already been passed in Sudan, according to attorney Samia El Hashmi. However, the Sudanese activist and legal expert says some of these laws exist only on paper.

"Women' s rights: human rights, social, and economic rights are not well protected. They are not well implemented," she says. "So we want to enhance the current situation. We' re providing legal aid to women, identifying discriminating laws against women and doing advocacy programs toward women' s rights."

Ala Noori Talabani, a member of the Iraqi National Assembly, suggests that post war legislatures should review and revise many of the laws passed before the conflict.

"Religious sharia law has been used against women' s rights," she says. "So we were able to change some of these things. For example, honor killing. It' s considered to be like any other crime. There is no excuse for that!"

Zohra Rasekh, Samia El Hashmi, and Ala Noori Talabani joined other activists from Rwanda, Colombia, Bosnia and Kyrgyzstan for this year' s women leaders' forum, the Initiative for Inclusive Security Colloquium. The focus of the colloquium was on women' s contribution to developing rule of law.

Miki Jacevic, Deputy Director of Policy Initiatives for Hunt Alternatives Fund says the colloquium is designed to provide these leaders with the skills and knowledge they need for increasing women' s participation, whatever their country' s political stage. "For example," he says, "in Colombia, we focus primarily on recommendations for including women in implementation of peace and justice law that was recently passed by the Colombian Congress. In Iraq, we discussed primarily how can the current process of shaping the new government and strengthening the new constitution ensure equal rights for women. In the case of Afghanistan, we discussed the new appointments for the Afghan Supreme court and the lobbying and advocacy efforts to ensure that qualified women could be hopefully appointed to that institution."

Since the forums began in 1999, policy-makers from U.S. government agencies, the United Nations, financial institutions and NGOs have met with activists and officials from nearly three-dozen nations. Mr. Jacevic says the program has attracted prominent women who have played a vital role in stopping the cycle of war and bringing about many positive changes in their countries.

"They are very established leaders such as newly-elected Liberian president, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, who was with us three years ago, who of course most likely would have been president anyway because she is such a strong and wonderful leader and will bring a change to Liberia," he says, but adds that he believes that participating in Initiative for Inclusive Security has had an impact. "I'm sure of the fact that part of her message in terms of the election campaign was geared toward the women vote does come from the fact that she has been a member of our network."

Many of the women who participate in this annual gathering say it is an extraordinary forum where they can exchange experiences with one another and strengthen their global network. They leave the forum inspired, and confident that they can improve life in their countries and the whole world.