

2006 Washingtonians of the Year: Zainab Salbi

By [Leslie Milk](#), [Ellen Ryan](#)

“It’s in the national interest to invest in women.”



Photograph by [Matthew Worden](#)

Instead of taking a honeymoon, Zainab Salbi took on the world.

The Iraqi native and her new husband meant to visit Spain in 1993. Then they heard news of the rape camps in Bosnia and Croatia.

Salbi found no nonprofits working on the problem, but All Souls Church, Unitarian, in Northwest showed an interest. With its support and \$2,000 of honeymoon money, the two flew to Croatia to document war victims’ horrors. Salbi, an abuse survivor herself, came back inflamed. She quit her translator job to start Women for Women International and serve “those with no money and no voice.”

WFWI first gains community support—crucial where men rule by the sword. Women most in need gather biweekly to share experiences, learn about rights, and receive survival and psychological aid. Meanwhile, women get guidance on business plans and long-term self-sufficiency. Some women lease or buy land to farm; some form cooperatives. In Kosovo, Salbi says, “everyone spent money on fixing damaged doorframes and windows. So we set up carpentry classes.”

The nonprofit does leadership training for men as well. As a result, an Ibo chief in Nigeria abolished persecution of widows; a Congolese leader punished soldiers who rape enemies.

Nearly 23,000 sponsors send encouraging letters plus \$27 a month for a year to women in nine countries. Supporters number 6,700 around DC, where WFWI is based. Growing up in Saddam Hussein’s Baghdad taught Salbi the safety of silence. Now she helps others find greater safety in speaking out—and “blossoming like a flower.”

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