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U.S: Iraqi Immigrant's NGO Reaches Women Who Suffer War's Toll

By Heather Maher

WASHINGTON, April 19, 2007 (RFE/RL) -- Zainab Salbi grew up in Iraq afraid of her own thoughts.

Salbi is the daughter of one of Saddam Hussein's private pilots, and her family lived in a fearful, silent environment where she was taught that the "wrong kind of thought" could lead to death or prison.

When she arrived in the United States at 23, it was through an arranged marriage that quickly turned abusive, but it was the first time she was able to read a newspaper and find out what was going on in the rest of the world.

It was 1993, and the news out of Bosnia-Herzegovina told of concentration camps and mass rapes of women prisoners. The accounts of atrocities triggered deep memories of her own wartime experience during the Iran-Iraq war.

A New Life

It was then that Salbi decided to start her life again. She divorced her abusive husband and began searching for a group to support her desire to help Balkan women affected by war.

Her search took her to a Washington D.C. church, where she worked in the basement with a stack of envelopes and a few donations. She began by sending a group of 32 women in Bosnia and Croatia a letter and \$27 each month. She says she simply wanted them to know they were not alone.

Fourteen years later, her nonprofit group, **Women For Women International**, has distributed \$30 million in aid and microcredit loans and has taught 93,000 women their rights and how to earn a living wage.

Through the group's sponsorship program, Salbi has connected thousands of women around the world with each other and, as she says, has enabled "them to take control of their resources and their voices and reach out to each other in this era of war."

Today, sitting in her sunny Washington office, surrounded by photos of joyful-looking women who have graduated from Women For Women trainings in eight war-ravaged countries in Africa and Europe, Salbi refuses to take credit and speaks of the need to address "the other side of war" -- the side that doesn't receive nearly as much attention as the bullets and bombs do.

"It ended up not being about one person, but about hundreds of thousands of people literally from all over the world who are joining in this effort and saying: 'Enough is enough. I'm going to reach out and help one woman stabilize her life,'" Salbi says. "Because if war is about two sides of the same coin, we only discuss one side of the coin, and that is the frontline discussion. And that's what men lead in the discussion -- the fighting and the troops and the bullets and all of that. And what we don't discuss in war is the 'backline' discussion, and that is what women [experience in] war, which is the impact on education and on health and on food and on all of these realities of life."

That's what Salbi says Women For Women International does: build peace by stabilizing women's lives. Her work is guided by the belief that strong women make strong societies.

"We teach them about women's rights and their role in the economy, and society, politics, and health, and we teach them vocational-skills training so they can actually get jobs, and they can earn a living and stand on their feet" she says. "And that's how we believe we can help women move from victims to survivors to active citizens."

Local Emphasis

All of the training staff is hired locally, because Salbi says she believes in the value of local knowledge. In Afghanistan, Women For Women has hired 60 local employees; in Kosovo and Iraq, about 50.

Before they decide to establish a training program, staff members introduce themselves to the leaders of a community -- the chief, mayor, or cleric -- to tell them what they're planning, explain the logic behind it, and obtain their cooperation.

Then they assess the needs of the community -- what are the biggest concerns. Clean water? Safe schools? Domestic violence? And what services are needed? Beauty salons? Shoemakers? Tailors?

House-to-house visits follow to choose 20 women at a time who will receive a year of sponsorship and training. Each woman is matched with a "sister" in the West -- usually Britain or the United States -- who makes a monthly financial contribution toward a stipend for the woman -- usually around \$15. The women also exchange letters and photos, and Salbi says that the emotional support is as important as the training course.

At the end of the year, the women graduate and can receive microcredit loans to start their own business or, alternatively, receive help finding employment or selling their products internationally -- whatever it takes to help them improve their lives.

"We're saying this is not only for women's sake," Salbi says. "Usually, women are the majority of the population in post-conflict [areas]. So it's also for societal sake. Because we really believe that there is no way that we can talk about building strong economies, strong democracies, strong societies without the full inclusion of strong women. And I really believe that strong women lead to strong nations. So the reason we're investing in women is for pragmatic reasons, as well as ideological reasons."

No End In Sight

Salbi points out that there have been 250 major wars since the end of World War II, producing 23 million casualties, 90 percent of whom are civilians. Three-quarters of those are women and children and the elderly. Peace, she believes, is as much about clean water, electricity, and medical clinics as it is about cease-fires and treaties.

"When we talk about peace, it can't be limited only to the frontline discussion," Salbi says. "Peace is not only the signing of a peace agreement. It needs also to mean the stabilization of people's lives and the improvement of people's lives."

Salbi makes frequent visits to the countries where Women For Women operates programs. She remembers a woman in Rwanda whose seven children were massacred and left to die on top of her -- she herself survived after being left for dead. When Salbi met her, the woman had adopted five orphans, given birth to a baby conceived from a rape, and was successfully farming a plot of land that enabled her to send her adopted children to school.

Another woman Salbi says she can't forget was an internally displaced person in Bosnia whose

husband was handicapped from years of torture in a concentration camp. When Women For Women found her, she was sleeping on a piece cardboard. After going through a training course, she started a small dairy and had earned enough to buy a home, send her son to school, and care for her husband.

"I really believe war is like a flashlight on humanity," Salbi says. "It shows us the worst of it, and it shows us the best of it. And part of the success for me comes from the best of humanity. Because every time I go and visit women in Bosnia or in Iraq or in Afghanistan or the Congo or other countries, I am in awe of the strength of these women, and the strength of humanity, and the beauty of humanity -- as much as I am in awe of its ugliness."

As much as Salbi loves her work, she says she would love to see a day when there is no more work for her to do.

"I always say the day we run out of "business" would be a very good day," she says. "We only work with women survivors of wars. There are 39 wars going on at the moment, and I can't wait to live in a world that doesn't have wars."

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