

Presentation on Women and Armed Conflict

On 11 March, the Women's Human Rights Program at The Advocates for Human Rights sponsored a presentation on Women and Armed Conflict at the University of St. Thomas School of Law. Speakers at the event included Cheryl Robertson, PhD, MPH, RN and Assistant Professor of the University of Minnesota School of Nursing and Zainab Salbi, President and CEO of Women for Women International and keynote speaker at International Women's Day in Minnesota.

Dr. Robertson began the presentation with a discussion on the effects of war on women and their communities. Dr. Robertson pointed out that women are oftentimes portrayed as victimized and helpless in the context of war. In reality, women in war have no choice but to remain strong in order to survive. Amidst chaos, women are forced to take on profound responsibilities to promote family cohesion.

According to Dr. Robertson, war produces numerous public health consequences including death and instability, mass population displacement, food shortage and hunger, and destruction of health care infrastructures. These consequences can result in the erosion of once-strong community and familial ties alongside the build-up of underground criminal networks that replace formal civil society. In order to protect their family, women often have to deal with gangsters and mafia types, oftentimes behaving way outside cultural norms in exchange for food and shelter. It is of no surprise that such circumstances leave their mark on these women. Ms. Robertson suggested that women begin the process of recovery within a community context as they gradually rebuild the routines and connections of life.

Zanaib Salbi also discussed the issue of women and armed conflict. Ms. Salbi stressed that war is infinitely more complex than the average American believes it to be. As a survivor of the Iran-Iraq war, Ms. Salbi is angered every time she watches the computer-generated missiles that news agencies project on television. War is not clean, Ms. Salbi reminded the audience. It is nothing like the computer generated visuals. Rather, war is bloody, violent and tears apart the lives of individual women. Ms. Salbi told the story of a 19 year-old Afghani woman who whose father went crazy after the bomb that was dropped on her house killed her only brother. In order to survive, the woman was forced to dress as a boy. She worked as a farmer and a construction worker and sold sacks of rice so that she could earn money to feed her family. "A bomb is not just a bomb," stated Ms. Salbi. It is capable of completely changing an individual's life.

To better understand women and armed conflict, Americans need to see war through new paradigms. Ms. Salbi suggested three ways to achieve this. First, the international community needs to begin to take responsibility for war. Ms. Salbi noted the situation in the Democratic Republic of Congo where more than 80,000 women have been subjected to rape, some of whom were raped by UN peacekeepers in the region. The U.N. should not be permitted to sanction this type of violence. Second, people need to shift the view of violence against women in war from something that is considered a natural consequence of war to

an indicator of the direction of a particular society. “Bad things start with women,” Ms. Salbi stated. For example, the Taliban first used violence against women before it targeted society at large. Finally, people need to talk more about the complexities that women face in a war setting. As an example, Ms. Salbi suggested that when a woman is raped in war, she is frequently regarded as a rape victim. Nevertheless, for this woman, rape is just one of the many hardships she must endure post-war. She has also been exposed to HIV/AIDS, her husband may have left her, she may be forced to abandon her children and leave her home; as such, she will have little means to survive.

The post-war period should also be approached differently: It should be seen as a window of opportunity for women to negotiate women’s rights. During war and in the immediate post-war period, women have new personal mobility. Rather than encourage women to return to the private life of their communities, the international community should strive to support women who have entered civil society. In addition, the post-war period provides women with an opportunity to negotiate legal and political rights. Ms. Salbi underlined that if women are not at the negotiating table in the post-war setting, they end up by being negotiated. The post-war windows should be embraced by Americans and the international community at large. For, as Ms. Salbi stated, “Stronger women lead to stronger nations.”