

EMPOWERING WOMEN IN CONFLICT ZONES

An Interview with Zainab Salbi

YJIA: Your organization, Women for Women International, has helped hundreds of thousands of women and distributed nearly \$100 million in aid, including direct aid and micro-credit loans. Which type of aid do you think has the most impact? Why?

Zainab Salbi: I am not sure if it is the type of aid that matters, rather I think it is how aid is delivered that counts. Survivors of conflict are people who once had normal lives. No matter how rich or poor the survivors were before the conflict, their lives were destroyed. Their memories of a stable life, however, are still very much alive. For me the question is—how do we deliver aid in a way that keeps both the integrity and the agency of the aid recipient intact? At the beginning of our work, we were just distributing aid to survivors with no concrete end in mind. This tactic helped spread the mistaken message that all those who are victims can receive aid. I began noticing that some of the women who came to our program would come embodying the idea of the victim, which made me realize we were sending the wrong message. In the process of helping people, it had become more about feeling good than making a concrete difference in people's lives. Thus, we need to develop programs that do not make women dependant on assistance. The goal should be to help activate the agency of women by helping them stand on their own feet.

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Zainab Salbi is the Founder and CEO of Women for Women International, a grassroots humanitarian and development organization helping women survivors of war rebuild their lives. She is also the author of two books and the recipient of the 2010 David Rockefeller Bridging Leadership Award, the Forbes Trailblazer Award, and Time Magazine's Innovator of the Month award. Ms. Salbi is a World Economic Forum Young Global Leader as well as a member of the Clinton Global Initiative Lead program. She also serves as a member of the UN Secretary General's Civil Society Advisory Group on UN Security Council Resolution 1325. Ms. Salbi has a master's degree in development studies from the London School of Economics and a BA in sociology and women's studies from George Mason University.

I remember a woman called Zainaba in Bosnia who said that before she came to the organization, her husband had just been released from two years of detention in a concentration camp. She told me how she was sleeping on a piece of cardboard and her teenage son wanted a pair of jeans. Her husband was completely handicapped from the torture he suffered in the concentration camps, and she was so poor that she slept on cardboard, but what she cared about the most was that her son wanted a pair of jeans. He was sixteen years old. But no one, no humanitarian aid would give her a pair of jeans for her son. Zainaba simply wanted to be a good mother, worrying that if she did not give her son what he wanted, he would become a thief. This story illustrates why we need aid with agency. It is not about the type of aid. It is how we deliver it in a way that respects the integrity of the people receiving it and activates rather than pacifies their agency.

YJIA: How does empowering women enhance the political and economic health of their communities? How does this compare to more gender-neutral development aid?

ZS: Gender-neutral aid excludes women in many ways. In the context of war, it is interesting to note that women are usually excluded from peace negotiations. Worldwide, only 2 percent of all peace agreement signatories are women. So we need to constantly question how peace is defined. Women keep life going, yet their voices – either during the war or after – are not incorporated. We are stuck in a cycle where fighting ends but peace does not follow. In Bosnia, for example, the Dayton Peace Agreement was signed seventeen years ago but peace still does not exist today. The inclusion of women is thus not some marginal discussion; it must be the central discussion.

There are also economic factors. Women reinvest 90 percent of their income into their families compared to men, who reinvest only 30 to 40 percent. This is not about excluding men. In fact, I believe we must reach out to men in more proactive and effective ways than we have done in the past. Men are very much excluded from the gender discussion and when they are included, it is usually with a finger pointed at them saying, “You are bad.” We need to shift that dialogue to one of cooperation and partnership.

YJIA: Your organization has worked with women from many different post-war countries. How do cultural and societal differences influence the work you do?

ZS: We have a template based on the principle that access to knowledge plus access to resources leads to lasting change. Both knowledge and resources are equally important in helping a woman stand up on her feet. Each country adjusts and adopts the template and principles to its own cultural requirements. For example, Afghan women talk within the framework of Islam while Congolese women talk within the framework of Christianity.

But what we are asking is – are there cultures that are rigid against women’s progress and access? In this regard, I argue that the vast majority of oppressive cultural practices are based on economic realities. For example, when a woman in Southern Sudan gets married, her family receives a dowry of cows. There is a whole family economy based on

the currency of the daughter. You can look at that and say, “Horrible, horrible culture. They are marrying their daughters off for cows.” Or you can ask, “What is the logic here?” The daughter is bringing assets to the family.

How about if we change how she brings those assets? How about if we prove to families that by having their daughters graduate from primary and secondary school and, perhaps, university, their salaries and incomes will be higher than the value of cows? When you can make an economic argument, I believe the culture is open to it. The majority of decisions are poverty-driven, not culture-driven.

YJIA: You stated in 2009 that you saw common links between the conflicts in Rwanda, Bosnia, and Iraq. What similarities do you see? Has anything changed in the past year and what can be done going forward?

ZS: I see a pattern of behavior in conflicts. I look at conflicts as a microcosm of reality. In wars, there is a particular way women are treated. Women are too often raped, not only by the enemy, but sometimes by peacekeeping troops. Today, 80 percent of refugees in the world are women and children and 90 percent of modern war casualties are civilians, of whom 75 percent are women and children. These behavioral patterns of killing, raping, pillaging, and burning are consistent and have been consistent throughout wars. The lack of outrage about what happens to women is also consistent. Their exclusion from decision-making processes is consistent as well.

Now there are differences. After a conflict ends, there is always a window of opportunity during which negotiations are happening. When women are organized enough to jump through that window of opportunity, they always accomplish a lot. The Rwandese case is a great example. After the genocide, Rwandan women made sure their rights were guaranteed, and sixteen years later today, 56 percent of the Rwandese Parliament members are women. When women miss out on the opportunity – either because they are not organized, they do not have access to knowledge, or they have been excluded and shut out, such as in Iraq or Bosnia – they move backward.

That is what happened to Iraqi women. Right now, the status of Iraqi women is worse than twenty years ago. There are consistent behavioral patterns and there are consistent opportunities. What differs between countries coming out of conflict is what happens during peace negotiations.

YJIA: Finally, what do you see as the promise of current U.S. and UN policies on women? Continuing challenges?

ZS: Consistency. Let me give you an example. I was in Sudan a few years ago and met with a member of the Sudanese government. While we were discussing various aspects of the status of women in Sudan such as their political participation, health, and economic well-being, he stopped me and said, “Until the UN delegation comes with 50 percent of its delegation as women, or the European Union, or the U.S., you need to stop talking about what we need to do when you are not doing your own job.”

Over the last few decades, we have moved away from narrowly talking about women and the issues that affect them to forcefully talking about women and being politically

correct about them. But the lack of political will in gender politics is still very present. Women and girls, according to the NoVo and Nike Foundations, get \$0.02 out of every \$1 in development aid. There is a lack of political will and consistent application of aid. While we are definitely talking the talk, we are still not walking the walk.

But women's empowerment is an evolution. This is not to dismiss what has been accomplished. The biggest urgency we have right now is what is happening in Afghanistan.

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Women for Women International is in Afghanistan partially because of what is happening to women. We talk a lot about Security Council Resolution 1325, which requires women to be at the negotiating table. However, as we speak, there is a reconciliation process occurring between the Afghan government and the Taliban, and women are not included in this process. Every single Afghan woman I have met is furious about this. They say to me, "You came, you helped us, and we took your help. Look at how we now stand on our feet, at how we have developed ourselves, while you

witness our rights being bargained away." So the urgency for me is: do we have to wait for more women to be stoned in a soccer stadium to be outraged? Or do we become outraged by the fact that women's rights are being negotiated away at this very moment while we look away? This is another betrayal of women. We cannot have peace in Afghanistan if women are not part of making that peace possible. ■

– *Interview conducted by Cristina Killingsworth.*