

Nobel Peace Laureate Mairead Maguire: Breaking the Silence on Israel's Human Rights Abuse of Palestinians to Support Women Human Rights Defenders

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Breaking the silence on Israel's human rights abuse of Palestinians is the best way to help Palestinian women human rights defenders and peacemakers.

About 10 years ago Doctor Mona El-Farra, one of Palestine's greatest woman human rights defenders, visited N. Ireland. Dr. Mona lives in the occupied Gaza Strip, and she came to share with us the story of occupied Gaza and its people. Many people in the audience were moved to tears on listening to the painful stories of ongoing collective punishment of war and bombardment by the Israeli military upon the civilian population of Gaza. The majority of Gaza's Palestinians are children and under 21. Collective punishment of a civilian population breaks the Geneva Conventions and is a war crime. What struck me was Dr. Mona's comment that 'every single person in Gaza is completely traumatized by so much violence and war.'

Today this collective punishment by Israeli Government policies goes on. Why has it lasted so long? The Palestinians have been most cruelly punished by Israeli policies of occupation, war and destruction. They say that 'silence' is golden, but regarding the plight of Gazans and Palestinians the 'silence' of the world, especially concerning their little children, shows a lack of moral and ethical leadership from the international Community. It behoves us to ask, "Why is President Obama not saying: '70 years of Israeli occupation is enough - it is time for Peace for the Palestinians?'"

I believe that Palestine, as do many people, is a key to peace in the Middle East. Its occupation by Israel is a sore in the body politic of the whole Middle East and affects many people around the world. As long as it remains unresolved there will never be hope for peace for Palestinians, Israelis, or anyone else. But what can be done to turn this painful situation for all concerned around, where is the Hope?

I believe we must look to the Palestinian Women Human Rights Defenders and Peacemakers, and take their lead and guidance as to how best we can support and help them in their painful and dangerous work for Human Rights and Freedom for Palestinians.

As women living in the midst of an Israeli occupation, built on an Apartheid System, Palestinian women know the high cost emotionally/psychologically/physically and financially

of the Israeli Military occupation and aggression. Their solutions—working for an end to the repression and occupation, the right to self-determination, and a Palestine built on human rights and international law—deserves the support of fair minded people around the world.

Palestinian women HRD and peacemakers in resisting the injustices being perpetrated upon their people deserve our support and we must each do what we can to break the silence. We can applaud and totally support their 'spirit of resilience and their nonviolent peaceful civil resistance'. Palestinian women human rights defenders are an example to us all, showing by their lives how human dignity and equality must be won, by replacing fear with courage, hate with love, war with peace, enmity with friendship. Palestinian women know that the Israeli people are not their enemies, but it is the unjust policies of an Israeli government they strenuously and courageously oppose.

Another form of violence faced by Palestinian women is the injustice of patriarchy, within which women's voices are often silenced not only in Palestine, but in many countries. However, Palestinian women human rights activists know that whilst working for freedom for Palestine. They must also work for individual human rights and freedom for themselves and their children. Freedom includes the civil rights of health care, development, etc. The women of Palestine have a right to freedom of conscience, personal choice, and the right for their choice to be respected both by religious, civic and political authorities, as have all women everywhere. Particularly in the area of health care, it is important to affirm women's moral autonomy in making healthcare decisions and ensure they will have the means to follow their decisions in their lives.

In spite of so many problems there is hope; and Palestinian Women Human Rights defenders and peacebuilders are the very bearers and channels of the hope and change that is already happening in Palestine. We global women help the Palestinian women human rights defenders by letting them know that we love them, we hear their voices. And knowing that many Palestinians cannot leave their country, we will be their voices and tell their story to the outside world. We know their suffering and we take inspiration from their courageous spirit of nonkilling and nonviolent resistance. We know Palestinian women are great peacemakers simply because they give their lives each day, in service of their families and communities; this is the soul of peacemaking. Palestinian Women Human Rights Defenders are the custodians, carriers and transmitters of the moral and ethical values and standards of what it means to be truly human. How difficult, some would say impossible, to teach the values of love, forgiveness, kindness, nonkilling whilst living in the midst of military occupation, siege and war. In my many visits to Palestine, I have witnessed in abundance all these values lived fully by the women of Palestine, and I have been touched and inspired by their lives.

As the Nobel Women's Initiative meet in the Netherlands to discuss how to protect Women Human Rights Defenders, I hope we can agree that breaking the Silence on Palestine, and insisting that people have a right to know what governments are doing in their name, is a way in which we all, especially journalists, media, can help. We too can support the Palestinian nonviolent movement and respond to Palestinian civil society when they ask us to support the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions campaign to help end the Israeli military occupation. We can especially pledge to support the ongoing Palestinian and Israeli HR and peace movements for justice believing that genuine diplomacy, dialogue and listening brings us to a new understanding of each other, being the only way to peace.

Let us hope too that the Israeli government will begin to give Leadership for Peace by turning away from occupation, militarism and war, and by opening the door to diplomacy, give hope to the people of Palestine, Israel, the Middle East and the World.

Mairead Maguire

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