

**WOMEN LEADERS – NETWORKING
FOR PEACE AND SECURITY IN THE MIDDLE EAST
Vienna, 30-31 May 2007**

Workshop 1: Media (and) War – Women’s Counter-Strategies?

PRESENTATION TO ROUND TABLE

In the WS on “Media (and) War – Women’s Counter Strategies” 19 participants from 5 countries in the Middle East, Turkey and Austria focussed on media coverage in war and conflict torn regions and the role of women.

One of the participants presented the joint Palestinian-Israeli media monitoring project “Words Can Kill Too” that revealed the following aspects:

- Almost total absence of women in war coverage;
- If present, women are reduced to the role of victims, and mothers and wives of soldiers;
- There is a general identification of media in war with the war leaders;
- Media generally do not challenge the war leaders’ allegation that violence is the only solution;
- “Alternative messages” are never reflected in headlines but hidden in the text;
- the world is divided into “good” (supporters of the country) and “bad”.

On the basis of this input a controversial discussion followed. We reached consensus on the need of common ethic criteria and rules for more accurate and fair reporting. We reached limits concerning the will and ability of journalists to try to understand “the other side”. However, the request is “to remain a journalist” when reporting and “not become a politician”.

We identified basic needs of journalists in the Middle East: (i) freedom of expression, (ii) prevention of persecution of journalists, (iii) protection of journalists in their work.

The Workshop issued following messages and recommendations also to be taken up by Women Leaders:

“Conflict sells” in the media but it also reflects the “language of war” used in political rhetoric. **We call upon Women Leaders** to refrain from using any “language of war” and contribute to raising awareness of the necessity to use a de-escalatory language to the effect that **“peace sells better than conflict”**.

In order to obtain a more balanced representation of all sides in the media, participants encourage activities such as co-operation programmes among the media present in this Workshop and beyond, including the exchange of articles, the development of national but also cross-cultural media monitoring projects. Co-operation with Western mainstream newspapers could entail regular columns and reports of and about women in conflict areas.

We raised the idea of “Women and Peace Journalism”, using this term to underline our efforts to give space to “alternative voices”, i.e. to women’s voices promoting peace as a counter-strategy to existing mainstream journalism. **We call upon Women Leaders** to assist these efforts by giving also more voice to peace building initiatives, especially women’s voices promoting peace.

In this context, we propose a “Women and Peace Journalism” Website which should provide room for the above mentioned “alternative voices” of women that are not covered by mainstream media. The Website would also give space to female politicians contributing to de-escalation and peace building.

We call upon Women Leaders to support these initiatives in various ways. If governments provide funding, however, the ownership of this project must stay with women from the non-governmental sector and with female journalists. Translation of the published texts into various languages is essential in order to make their messages accessible to the broader public.

There was a discussion about incentives for newspapers and journalists to make them publish more women’s voices, more voices supportive of peace and reconciliation. Such incentives could be media awards for exceptional performance in this field.

Some participants expressed their opinion that “Women and Peace Journalism” should be better represented in the framework of the UN, perhaps through a respective commission. **We call upon Women Leaders to support media initiatives of “Women and Peace Journalism”** in their respective environments, to support initiatives on the international level, such as in the framework of the United Nations, the European Union and other international fora.

A major point of recommendations concerns media training for women. **We call upon Women Leaders but also upon NGOs to support initiatives in this context:**

- More training of professional journalism, in particular in the Middle East and the Arab world
- Training must include courses in human rights, and a more accurate awareness of history, sociology etc.
- Training has to be provided by independent organisations, not governments to ensure independent reporting.
- New forms of media coverage such as online journalism should be taught professionally.
- Inter-cultural and cross-border mentoring and mentorship programmes are needed.

In the discussion with Austrian editors in chief and Austrian journalists media representatives from the Middle East reported about their situation and working environment. Suggestions by Austrian media for co-operation included possible exchange of articles in print or online, the different possibilities have still to be explored. Participants planned to continue to use this media network.

It should not be kept a secret that the representatives of Western media in the workshop as well as in the meeting with Austrian journalists were strongly advised by

their Middle Eastern colleagues to give up their illusion that their reporting is “neutral”. They were charged especially of selective reporting which is another form of bias.

Finally, the participants of the media workshop agreed on a text of a resolution in support of BBC correspondent Alan Johnston, who was abducted in March 2007 in Gaza. **We urge the Women Leaders Round Table** to intensify efforts for his immediate and unconditional release. The text of the resolution will be distributed to the RT.