Developing agency through peacebuilding in the midst of intractable conflict: The case of Israel and Palestine

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This paper discusses the presence of ‘peacebuilding islands’ within civil society as potential agents of transformation in the midst of intractable conflict. Focusing on the particular case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the argument stems from a deconstruction of the legacy of national myopia perpetuated through social and political institutions and the capacity of individuals to impact them. Inspired by feminist organisations and the personal experience of feminist peace activists in Israel and Palestine, the author discusses the intersection of a variety of peacebuilding and educational initiatives as paramount to the building of a culture of peace in the region. The study embraces strategies that challenge the structural, socio-cultural and inter-personal status quo as part of a multi-layered effort at transforming conflict in the Middle East.

Keywords: Peacebuilding; Agency; Israeli-Palestinian conflict; Feminism; Peace education; Contact programmes; Social change

Introduction

The arena of protracted conflict in Israel and Palestine has evolved a plethora of activists and researchers engaging in inter-group bridge building or relationship-building methodologies with members of both communities in the hope of, one day, bringing peace to the region (Bar-On, 2002; Bar-Tal, 2003; Feuerverger, 2001; Hertz-Lazarowitz & Eden, 2002; inter alia). The predominant model in use is a form of peace education known as ‘the contact model’ (McCauley, 2003; Berg, 2000)—the ideal of which offers a forum through which groups of equal status individuals, representing both sides of a conflict, interact and thus embrace new perceptions and behaviours toward one another. Conceptualised within the practice of prolonged contact and activities that cut across group loyalties is the hope that in ‘humanising’ the enemy, avenues for peaceful relations ensue (Feuerverger, 2001).
Much literature has surfaced in response to this emphasis on the contact model, arguing that its reach is limited (reaching only small portions of the population), and its impact on either Israeli or Palestinian society has been minimal (McCaulley, 2003; Velloso, 1998; Firer, 2002). The focus on personal transformation, often at the expense of organising for systemic change, is specifically problematised (McCaulley, 2003; Ross, 1993). Structural impediments that include pervasive nationalisms, hyper-militarised social relationships and culturally-divided power inequities overcome the capacity of individual agents to internalise their peace learning and endeavour toward radical social change in a conflict situation.

Below, I argue in response to the lessening faith in contact programmes that there is indeed the possibility of utilising these methodologies in a process of peace, so long as they are not the only arena for learning, making and building peace. Building on theories by Sen (1999) and Kabeer (1994), I argue that although structures and individuals impact one another symbiotically, systemic transformation turns on the capacity of the individual to act as an agent for social change. Thus, education for social change (Salomon, 2002), which is exemplified in the contact models, must turn on this theme as well; the development of individual agency within impeding social constraints is the key to the transformation of the status quo of violent conflict. Thus, I build on the nature of conflict as a site of struggle and a catalyst in the social learning of individuals. Further, I utilise a feminist lens (discussed below) to argue that institutional change, stemming from conflict arenas, acts as a catalyst in the formation of alternative paradigms concerning historical ethnic conflict, thus laying the foundation for positive social change. A particular example from this context, the Israeli-Palestinian women’s movements and their endogenous development of feminist peace networks, is used to demonstrate the possibility of personal and systemic transformations. It is my argument that the successful formation of coalitions in this one arena (Bahdi, Macklin, & Wazana; Jacoby, 1999a; Sharoni, 1999) supplies the inspiration for such development in other modalities of peacebuilding, and a further opportunity for building capacity in learners as agents for peace and social change. In accordance with the work of Lederach and Goodman, Klein, & Wallace (2002), the enabling structures, necessary for articulating and actualising the transformative learning present in such relationship-building endeavours as contact programmes, are developed through links made to multi-levels of leadership and multi-modes of education and action. I end my discussion citing the feminist arena as a space through which to develop a multi-layered approach to peacebuilding and peacebuilding education. The following orchestrates my belief that this trend is the key to the development of a culture of peace in the Middle East.

**Locating my conceptual framework**

The impetus for this research is my on-going search for constituencies of peace within the arena of protracted conflict amid Israelis and Palestinians. As a daughter of Israeli Zionists, it is my hope that such spaces qualitatively impact the political will
of two peoples entrenched in mutual mistrust and suffering, and may, in turn, quantitatively transform a one hundred year legacy of hatred. With what seems, at times, like a leap of faith, it is an assumption that turns on the belief that the individual is centripetal to the transformation of inequitable structural relationships, and further, that the site of micro-narratives (that is, personal experience) can shift the impact of the meta-structure (meaning social, political, cultural and economic pressures). Grace Feuerverger’s *Oasis of Dreams* (2001) provides a particular example of this mode of thought. Through personal reflections of a conflict resolution and co-existence programme for Israelis and Palestinians called ‘The School for Peace’, she writes that ‘one way of bringing about social change is through the building of relationships’ (Feuerverger, 2001, p.88). Incurred at the level of the inter-personal, positive impressions of the ‘other’ developed through group activities and dialogue, potentially shift to include the entire population and encourage new perspectives on equitable peace. This transformation of the individual mind-set is then intended to impact and inform the greater community.

That said, I also consider the larger dialogical ‘problématique’; that is, the influence of social and structural forces on the capacity of the individual to act as agent, accountable for social change. As Amartya Sen explains in his foundational work, *Development As Freedom*, ‘it is important to give simultaneous recognition to the centrality of individual freedom and to the force of social influences on the extent and reach of individual freedom’ (Sen, 1995, p.11). In other words, there is a symbiotic relationship between system and person, and effective interventions in the geo-political or inter-personal landscape must incorporate mechanisms for weaving in and out of both dynamics. The concern here then, is the development, implementation and practice of structurally-minded and agent-empowering endeavours—what has come to be known as peacebuilding.

The term, initiated by Johan Galtung in 1976, has transcended its original meaning in which it referred to ‘a specific infrastructure within and among nations that removes causes of war and offers alternatives to war in situations where it might occur’ (Mazurana & McKay, 1999, p.7). It was further developed by the former secretary general of the UN, Boutros-Boutros Ghali (1992) to encapsulate as well the ‘rebuilding (of) the institutions and infrastructures of nations torn by civil war and strife; and the building of bonds of peaceful mutual benefit among nations formerly at war’ (Mazurana & McKay, 1999, p. 7). However, it still did not incorporate the holistic perspective discussed by Dyan Mazurana and Susan McKay in *Women and Peacebuilding* (1998) that I am referring to here. Nor did it include the dynamics of positive and negative peace from a feminist perspective—which deals with the ending of the structural as well as the direct violence inherent in private as well as public conflict situations—argued by a majority of present day feminist and peace theorists as integral to the process of building peace (i.e. Goodman, 1999; Goodman, Klein & Wallace, 2002; Reardon, 1993; *inter alia *...). Thus, for our purposes, peacebuilding involves ‘personal and group accountability and reconciliation processes which contribute to the reduction or prevention of violence. They foster the ability of women, men, girls and boys in their own cultures to promote the
conditions of nonviolence, equality, justice and human rights of all people, to build democratic institutions and to sustain the environment’ (Mazurana & McKay, 1999, p.9). It will also be of interest to note the particular forms peacebuilding takes within communities seeking to transform violent conflict, as well as the conditions that enhance or impede their capacity to encourage social change.

**The Arab-Israeli conflict**

The context for our discussion is the Israeli-Palestinian territories, in which a collective social narrative has normalised a culture of perpetual violence. (Raviv, Bar-Tal, Koren-Silvershatz & Raviv, 1999) Additionally, the current climate of disdain for a just peace, the definition of which neither group can agree upon, (Goodman, Klein & Wallace, 2002) reinforce ongoing ‘psychocultural dispositions’ that define the relationship between the two warring groups and further embed the socio-structural conditions that underlie the direct violence, as well as determine the unequal distribution of resources and control over the region. The deleterious impact of violent conflict on the political will toward social change is corroborated by Ross (1991), with his discussion of societal constraints on individual agency in the midst of war cultures:

> Social structural conflict theory identifies the primary source of conflict in the social, economic, and political organization of society and in the nature and strength of ties within and between communities; and psychocultural conflict theory emphasizes the role of culturally shared, profound “we-they” oppositions, the conceptualization of enemies and allies, and deep-seated dispositions about human action stemming from earliest development. (Ross, 1993:17)

Applied to the Israeli-Palestinian context, these societies’ cultures of conflict—the social norms, institutions, practices and processes for dealing with conflict (Ross, 1993)—are co-opted by both the collective narrative of mutual mistrust and the power inequity inherent in situations of occupation and subordination, as is the case here. In yet another example of a dialectic, these two faces of conflict (the psychocultural and the socio-structural) intertwine and thus must also be incorporated in our strategies for empowering individual will as the site for economic, political and social transformation. Allow me to paint a picture of the difficulties of such a task:

For Palestinians, the conflict originates as a direct result of the influx of European Jews to the Middle East at the beginning of the late nineteenth century and their declared intention to establish a state for themselves in the midst of Palestine. In 1948, the war that erupted in response to Israel’s declaration of independence from British rule relegated Palestinians to refugee status, as well as a minority within their own country. It also determined the legacy of violence that continues to permeate this relationship. The trauma of this war (called ‘Nakhbah’ or ‘Catastrophe’ according to Palestinians, and the War of Independence in Israeli texts) still affects the daily experience of the Palestinian community. Only 160,000 Arabs were allowed to remain in the Jewish State, while two thirds were expelled to bordering
regions, some fleeing burning villages and traumatised by the slaughter of innocents. (Farhat-Naser, 2002) They were witnesses to the disappearance of their cities and villages in the wake of new Jewish settlements while Jewish history books have never told their story (Makkawi, 1998).

Military rule and the loss of civic rights found the initial experience of Palestinians under Israeli control. The ‘Six Day War’ of 1967 (in which the West Bank, Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem were annexed by Israel) through to the liberation uprisings (known as the Al-Aqsa Intifada of 1987 and 2000) continued the dynamic of mistrust, fear and retribution. Today, the tale still includes the direct and structural violence of occupation at the hands of Israeli military might; daily life bespeaks curfews, village closures, humiliations at border crossings, a desperate lack of humane living conditions, a lack of water, the sometimes daily barrage of tanks and bulldozers and ever-increasing poverty and unemployment levels. Nahla Abdo describes the impact on the collective narrative of her people:

Speaking from the vantage point of being Palestinians, they see themselves as being the rightful inhabitants, the indigenous people of Palestine who were dislocated from their own homes by the ‘other’, who therefore, were searching for a new location. Viewed from the lenses of the dislocator, i.e. the Zionists\(^2\) (and later, the Israelis), Palestinians, or the indigenous people of that very location, were turned into the ‘other’, into an invisible entity. At this juncture of the encounter, the foreign settler emerged as the legitimate ‘self’ who, as the myth goes, “finally found its place of relocation”, while the natives of the country lost their rightful and legitimate claim to their own land. Over the past fifty-three years, indigenous Palestinians have turned into a dispossessed entity with life in exile, in Diaspora, mostly taking refugee camps as their ‘homes’ (Abdo, 2002: 119).

Thus the culture of conflict among Palestinians is embedded through collective memory of trauma—the psychocultural. As well, the occupation of Palestinian land continues to frustrate efforts at self-determination and statehood, economic independence and political efficacy—the socio-structural.

The mind-set of Israeli Jews is no less complex or entrenched. For these ‘occupiers’, citizenship and identity is tied as much to the history of trauma that defines the experience of the Jews, as it is to the current culture of violence. After more than 2000 years of persecution at the hands of the ‘Gentiles’, or non-Jews, culminating in the horrors of Nazism in the Second World War, the land of Israel has become a symbol of safety and security, central to the survival of Jews as a nation constantly surrounded by hostile forces. The Palestinian and Arab nations merely represent the latest manifestation of this threat. As expressed by Augustin Velloso in *Peace and Human Rights Education in the Middle East*, ‘the State of Israel is the answer to the Holocaust and the Arabs represent the outside forces striving for their destruction [succeeding Nazis]; this is simply one more instance in the long history of their triumphant struggle to survive’. (Velloso, 1998, p.360) Thus, the Judaic culture of trauma manifests a primordial xenophobia built into the Israeli consciousness. This is potentially a key factor in the fear that defines the demand for security among the people of the ‘Jewish State’ and the oppressive relationship they have to the ‘threat of violence’ in their midst, as well as those living across the
‘Green Line’ in the Occupied Territories. Although structurally, Israelis take on the role of oppressor, with the balance of power in their favour, a collective victimhood has evolved into a discourse of self-righteousness among Israelis in respect to their actions toward the ‘Other’. The psychocultural face of conflict dominates the Israeli position and seems its greatest impediment to a popular will for the inculcation of a just peace.

**Peacebuilding and peace education**

The story has become systemic—a social, political and human infrastructure embedded in the logic and practice of war. And yet, it is amidst this climate that we attempt to engage in the study of peacebuilding, and its specific manifestations in Israeli and Palestinian societies as pedagogical and political initiatives for social change. At this point, a paradox emerges. How do we negotiate effective spaces for addressing the problématique of an institutionalised culture of violence, without an already prevalent political atmosphere through which to invoke peace? Sami Adwan, a peace education theorist working with the Harry S. Truman Centre for Peace at The Hebrew University in Jerusalem, identifies a key site for the development of processes capable of encouraging social and structural transformation; once again, the dialectic turns to the micro-context:

> As we Palestinians and Israelis have lived all these years in war and hatred and our cultures have been built viewing each other as enemies and opposites, each shared reality and shared value negates the existence of the other side. Victories of one side are disasters for the other side. One side’s heroes are the other side’s monsters. Joy on one side is misery for the other side. If the peace process is to continue, we should work toward a culture of peace instead of a culture of enmity, war and destruction, and education could play this role: education for prosperity, dignity, and human rights. For the sake of peace we have to alter our modes of education. (Adwan, cited in Velloso, 1998: 371).

Adwan’s words, like those quoted earlier from Mazurana and McKay, discuss the necessity for fostering the capacity of individuals to promote enabling structures in opposition to traditions of national myopia. The argument reorients education towards the building of a culture of peace. Thus my understanding of education and peacebuilding defines the two as interchangeable in the Israeli-Palestinian context. Following this logic, what I have come to call ‘teaching peace’ (the inter-weaving of peacebuilding and education) incorporates ‘education for social change’ (Salomon, 2002; Burns & Aspeslagh, 2003; Fisk, 2000; *inter alia*).

The term ‘education for social change’ is framed in the hope that the learning and practice of peacebuilding education leads to the development of relationships capable of bridging national, ethnic and cultural gaps endemic to war cultures. (Goodman, Klein & Wallace, 2002; Fauverger, 2001; *inter alia*). Incorporated within its teachings is the ‘generation and transmission of knowledge which challenges dominant thinking’ (Burns & Aspeslagh, 2003). Further, it teaches a critique of the structures and processes that underlie the negation of peace and thus enables learners to develop alternative models for cultivating a more positive peace
paradigm (ibid). As well, the development of skills and capacities for the practice of non-violent conflict management is an important aspect of education for social change (Bickmore, 2004a).

The perpetuation of structural violences since the signing of the Oslo Peace Accord and the resulting re-institutionalisation of violence since the year 2000, impedes the capacity of formal education to embrace Adwan’s expectations for learning peacebuilding. Thus, transformative education of this kind, that is explicit education for the building of peace, have been undertaken predominantly by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working in Israel and Palestine today (Berg, 2000; Goodman, Klein & Wallace, 2002). Alex Berg (2000) organises NGO educational projects under the category headings of either ‘humanisation’ or ‘needs-based’ programmes. The educational bent of the former focuses on ‘overcoming psychological barriers and promoting mutual acceptance through dialogues, encounters and other joint activities’ (Berg, 2000, p.8). The latter include ‘organisations that are working to promote peace by alleviating material hardship, as well as those that are facilitating cooperative projects to address tangible issues and transform relationships’ (Berg, 2000, p.8). The contact model upon which both manifestations are based, conceptualise relationship building at the inter-personal or micro-level paramount to social change. In this style of educational initiative, the individual is the starting point for conflict transformation.

**Allport’s contact theory**

Allport (1954) defines four imperatives as necessarily present in order for prejudices between groups to be transformed through contact between members of opposing groups: First, the encouragement of equal status between groups despite asymmetries outside the meeting; second, the development of interdependent and cooperative relationships that cut across in-group and out-group divisions. This is accomplished through the third imperative, the orchestrating of super-ordinate goals shared by all who participate. Finally, contact models must incorporate the capacity for extensive and continuous contact between participants.


Specific programmes described in Salomon and Nevo’s book include a contact workshop involving Israeli, Palestinian and Jordanian students in which participants (20 from each national group) live and study together for two ‘intensive’ weeks in
order to develop a deeper understanding of medical sciences. The authors consider this a supportive environment banking on the equal treatment of participants, where-in interdependency develops through group projects simultaneous to cross-cutting group and individual efforts at redefining stereotypes of the ‘other’. There is also a follow-up meeting in the winter. Another positive example described in this work is of the needs-based variety. Hertz-Lazarowitz & Eden (2002) describe a long-term NGO project between Israeli-Jews and Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel, all principals of educational institutions in Acre, through which the needs of the community seem to have become a common super-ordinate goal of both groups. The contact programme, initially a professional encounter, lasted well-beyond the shelf-life of the intended project and developed into a pervasive political project to better the education of all children in Acre, be they Palestinian or Jewish.

Berg’s thesis describes co-existence-based projects, with ‘Seeds of Peace’, a camp programme offering an encounter for Palestinian and Israeli students in the USA and Canada, his highlight for NGO initiatives. This is characteristically a three week camping experience, in which friendship and embodied learning, as well as exchange, dialogue and interdependency are focal points. This practice is typical of a majority of dialogue programmes taking place in Israel and Palestine.

Goodman’s study terms her focused projects ‘cross-party bridge building work’. They tend to be informal, cross-cutting efforts at bridging the relationship gap between Israelis and Palestinians. Through arts projects and musical performances, student-edited magazines and theatrical displays, these initiatives offer a natural environment for dialogue. The Bridge: Jewish and Arab Women for Peace in the Middle East, specifically exemplifies the model. In bringing together women from both communities to dialogue their experience as writers and as women, as well as victims and perpetrators of conflict, they find common ground and spaces from which to understand one another’s points of view.

In fact, the examples are endless, and need not be detailed further here. Typically, they bring together a wide array of individuals (usually in peer-based groups) from both communities, in both formal and informal settings, and endeavor (either through direct dialogue models or through participatory projects) to engage in the often painful and difficult pursuit of reforming each participant’s relationship to the ‘other’. I argue that all the projects described above play a role in developing an education for social change. However, as the two nations of Israel and Palestine become increasingly embedded in violence, it is logical to question the impact of contact programmes and workshops.

In promoting empathy, a central theme incorporated into contact workshops for challenging psycho-culturally induced stereotypes and developing cooperative projects that promote interdependency, a mechanism for cross-cutting socio-structural delineations, contact programme workshops seem to enable small scale, individual changes (Berg, 2000). However, as expressed by Clark McCauley ‘such workshops aim to change hearts and minds of participants, but typically offer little support for behaviour change’ (McCauley, 2002, p.247). Maoz (2002) and Berg (2000) argue similarly that although encounter programmes challenge structural
limitations present within the educational experience, they do not commonly address issues of agency away from the safe haven of the educational programme. In the end, these initiatives appear fragmented at best, unsustainable within the reality of systemic oppression and the collective narrative of mutual victimisation (Velloso, 1998). Despite offering an important layer in the peacebuilding process, in truth, it seems the ‘conscientization’ method (i.e. the sharing of stories and empathising through dialogue and inter-dependent contact), which is at the core of most encounter programmes, may not be enough to bridge 100 years of hatred and hostility; the psychocultural context is not easily transformed without enabling structures to support individuals interested in changing them. Unfortunately, the NGO driven contact programme is one of very few arenas in Israel and Palestine today in which members from these communities can come together and attempt to redefine the conditions for ‘co-existence’. Thus the personal level of transformation at which contact programmes prove somewhat successful (Feuerverger, 2001) could be incorporated into a larger pattern for social change; but, insufficient as they are in mobilising citizen action, contact programmes remain only a small piece of the process. The development of an active political will necessitates a more pervasive challenge to the status quo culture of conflict.

A gender sensitive analysis

Both Tami Jacoby (1999) and Simona Sharoni (1999), feminist scholars from the region, argue a possible entry-point for reconceptualising the conflict from the perspective of agency: that of a gender sensitive analysis. In Sharoni’s words, ‘because gender shapes so much of our identities, experiences and behaviours, by paying close attention to changes in conceptions of femininity, masculinity and gender relations, we may gain insight into the complex processes of identity formation and transformation’ (Sharoni, 1999, p.1) (italics, my addition). Gender then is a social construction. And, utilising this lens, we begin to disaggregate fluctuations in social norms and power relations, and thus to envision a more dynamic understanding of the conditions of structural hegemonies. As Connell explains, deconstructing gender hegemonies enables space for active engagement with social definitions of human relationships—the mainstay of education for peace (Connell, 2000). From a feminist perspective, this means that we encourage a starting point that originates from women’s and men’s personal experiences with conflict, violence and peace—and the institutions that perpetuate them—as opposed to conceding to the apparent permanency of large structural impositions. (Mazurana & McKay, 1998) Kathy Bickmore cements our argument with these words: ‘Individuals are influenced by, and influence big social institutions such as the state, the military and the “globalised” business structure; we make up those social structures, and we continue to transform them’ (Bickmore, 2004b, p.4). In other words, social institutions are an expression of the rules and collective beliefs of individuals within society (Kabeer, 1994). We create them, we reproduce them and we can change them.
When a society’s institutions are in flux, as in the example of Palestine, a nation in the midst of self-actualisation, and Israel, a nation still grasping for a permanent space in the geo-political sphere, patterns for challenging structural imperatives become plausible (Meitjes, Pillay & Turshen, 2001). Sharoni (1999), through her discussions of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the violence of Northern Ireland, argues that individual and group action is empowered during conflict, and voices of dissent divine alternative mechanisms for approaching structural hegemonies. The article in question, *Gendering Conflict and Peace in Israel/Palestine and the North of Ireland*, describes the specific experience of women’s advocacy groups before and what she delineates ‘the morning after’ a peace accord is signed. She argues that the signing of peace is not necessarily the harbinger of positive change, specifically when seen through a gender lens. In fact, examining the ‘before’ and ‘after’ of feminist activities in Israel and Palestine, leads one to believe that the conflict, and specifically the First Intifada, has promoted sufficient flexibility in gender and class roles to encourage transformation of certain elements of the status quo. Although she also discusses the potential for more sustainable, government supported feminist advocacy in the aftermath of the signing of peace treaties, institutional change is profound during times of insecurity. This is exemplified in Israel and Palestine as aspects of intra-group hierarchies and the practice of political, economic and cultural relations continue to shift—for example, the growing power of civil society and grassroots NGOs in both Israel and Palestine, (Berg, 2000) the promotion of feminist activism throughout the Middle East, (Jacoby, 1999a) the deconstruction of Yassir Arafat’s ‘kingdom’ and the previously unheard of move by a hard-line, pro-settler right wing politician to disengage from the Gaza Strip.

Most important to our discussion here of institutional transformation, is the capacity of women, as agents and as individuals, impacted by new experiences of political advocacy, to subvert socially constructed images of women as victims of war or recipients of peace and take up a platform of social and political advocacy. (Jacoby, 1999a; Meitjes, Pillay & Turshen, 2001; Bahdi, Macklin & Wazana, 2003, *inter alia*) Specifically through their participation as ‘accidental activists’ (non-politically minded individuals compelled through personal conviction to act as agents for social change), some women experienced an immense conscientization of their rights as citizens to participate in the public realm, and denote a more equitable gender relationship. (Sharoni, 1999) This, according to Jacoby (1999a), is the central focus of feminisms of the Middle East, and demonstrates the capacity of social and political upheaval to enable individuals to challenge the status quo.³

The First Intifada, in particular, gave Palestinian women an opportunity to shift into public persona. In its first years, the developing feminist consciousness was almost palpable, with thousands of women joining the various trade unions, community work efforts, and political demonstrations for national freedom. On March 8, 1988, Palestinian women marched in throngs on International Women’s Day, demonstrating their newfound liberation and pride in sisterhood:

On that day middle-class women in high heels, teenagers in jeans, and village women in traditional dress marched through the streets of Ramallah and other towns and villages
throughout the West Bank and Gaza. Many women had tears in their eyes—not from the inevitable tear gas but from the exhilaration of a new spirit of women’s solidarity and defiance. (Sabbagh, 1998, p.22)

In Israel, Sharoni argues that ‘women’s mobilisation was both a catalyst and a result of the general climate of change in both societies’ (Sharoni, 1999, p.3). Furthermore, Jacoby confirms this perspective in her article, *Gendered Nation: A History of the Interface of Women’s Protest and Jewish Nationalism in Israel*. She proposes that the current climate of hyper-masculinisation and both inter and intra-group violence has initiated a new wave of feminism and activism among Israeli women. Dissent from the national narrative of Judaic supremacy and male superiority (specifically due to beliefs about military prowess and combat participation), was sparked in the 1970s as an anti-war movement, and more recently ignited as an anti-occupation and anti-oppression movement. For the first time since the early attempts of feminists to create autonomous women’s unions in pre-state Israel, women are arguing against their subordination within the nationalist doctrine, and thus the doctrine that subverts Palestinian equality as well. Jacoby (1999b) argues this fluctuation in Israeli hegemony was due to war-time losses and challenges to the right of Israeli military men to wage war unjustly on the bodies of children. The ‘accidental activism’ experienced by Israeli women involved in anti-war and anti-occupation movements stemmed initially from their roles as mothers, and then blossomed into a conscientization of the masculinisation of Israeli society. As evidenced in the example, the conflict opened up spaces for the emergence of Israeli feminisms as well.

**Feminist networks**

I acknowledge in these pages that ‘conflict’ and ‘peace’ are neither static conditions nor diametrically opposed realities (Sharoni, 1999). And further, that ‘conflict opens up intended and unintended spaces for empowering women, effecting structural social transformations and producing new social, economic and political realities that redefine gender and caste hierarchies’ (Meintjes, Pillay & Turshen, 2001, p.7). What still remains to be seen is a methodology for sustaining transformative elements of the conflict period in the aftermath.

My initial reasoning behind choosing the women’s movements as a comparative for contact initiatives was because, much like the fragmented attempts of NGO interventions at transforming the structural status quo, past efforts to institutionalise new, more equitable relations of power in the reconstruction period have been impeded. Equally significant for comparison is that the learning that takes place among feminist peace builders and advocates for social change mirrors the transformative pedagogy of contact programmes. That is, personal conscientization of socially constructed (the psychocultural) patterns, structural violences that embed the collective narrative (the socio-structural) and inter-personal strategies and group strategies for challenging the conflict. Thus, the failures and successes of feminist endeavours become the learning curve for peace educators.
Fragmentation in the feminist movement is exemplified in the rejuvenation of a patriarchal social order in Palestine since the Oslo Accord was signed in 1994 (Jacoby, 1999b; Morgan, 1998; Strum, 1998; *inter alia*). Details include a reconstructed patrilineal structure legitimising the control of women in both the public and private arenas by their male relatives, manifesting in such things as rape, honour killings and restricted movement of women without a male relative. For its part, in Israel, the feminist movement has lost momentum since the new era of ‘peace’. A multitude of reasons can be discussed, not the least of which is the current climate of ‘security at any cost’, silencing feminists in diametric opposition to the national patriarchal doctrine of occupation and control (Sharoni, 1999; Jacoby, 1999; Klein, 1998).

Losses of women’s rights are discussed in reference to a lack of a united feminist agenda (Hiltermann, 1998). As a result, the women of these movements have learned to join together, to organise in order to bring about a collective solution to their problems. We have seen, since the outbreak of direct violence and increased ‘suicide activism’ in the region since 2001, an increase in feminist networks, both within Israel and Palestine, and amid the international community. Examples such as ‘The Jerusalem Link’ (a dialogue model inclusive of an Israeli feminist organisation and a Palestinian women’s centre), ‘The Coalition of Women for Peace’ (made up of more than ten feminist advocacy and empowerment or research groups working in both Israel and Palestine) and MIFTAH (a Palestinian organisation cross-cutting the various political organisations of Palestinian civil society to bring together feminists as advocates of gender equality and social change) demonstrate that organisation is key to institutional transformation, in so far as they provide structural support to individuals learning and acting for social change. Feminist networks organise on the basis of personal transformation and public or political action (Patel, 1995). Learning is inter-personal, localised and empowerment-oriented, as in the example of women’s centres in Palestine that focus on women’s self-determination and conscientization through consciousness raising circles and skill development (Rubenberg, 2001). Action is facilitated through coalitions that reach up and across social and political divisions, exemplified in the protests and public dialogues rampant throughout Israel and Palestine today (Bahdi, Macklin, & Wazana, n.d.) Thus, both a systemic and agent-centred process is developed through feminist organising.

Naila Kabeer, a 2/3rds world feminist whose work delineates the importance of women’s empowerment in the development of a more democratic, equitable and non-violent world, argues that ‘given women’s disenfranchisement from most sources of institutional power, their collective strength is seen as the most important transformative resource at their disposal’. (Kabeer, 1996) This was also the predominant argument given by the authors of *The Aftermath, Women in Post-Conflict Transformation* (Meintjes, Pillay & Turshen, 2002), a volume discussing the experience of women living in conflict situations in Africa, and one I see as especially helpful to the field of peace education: In order to further develop their capacity to transform the social norm, and existing as they do without sustainable
mechanisms in place to institute and implement pervasive programmes under the entitlement, ‘education for social change’ and based on the growing successes of feminist coalition building, I believe that there is an immense need for partnerships and organisational support systems among peace education theorists, practitioners and advocates. Patel corroborates my assessment in her article, From a Seed to a Tree: Building Community Organization in India’s Cities. She states: ‘Educational and organisational strategies must go hand in hand if the processes of mobilisation... is to be comprehensive, sustainable and capable of delivering lasting change’. (Patel, 1995, p.87)

This brings me to the crux of my argument. At the centre of the dialectic of individual agency and societal chains, lies the intermediary potential of NGO interventions, in so far as they manifest attempts at organisational links. Both Goodman (2002) and Mazurana and McKay (1999) advocate an increased network of these civil society representatives. Perfectly suited as they are to mobilise change—they are outside government control, and link the grassroots to the international community and vice versa, (Patel, 1995; Breines, I., Connell, R. & Eide, I., 2000) as well as acting the primary arena for peace education and co-existence initiatives in Israel and Palestine, a coalition of NGO activism enables an alternative and empowered movement for social and political change. Under such conditions, personal transformative efforts at relationship-building expand beyond small islands or constituencies of peace and develop into avenues for mobilisation and public advocacy.

Multi-layered peacebuilding

I take my cue in this arena from the work of conflict resolution theorist John Paul Lederach, who discusses the presence of a variety of ‘gaps’ in the attempts of conflict ridden societies to develop their capacity for building peace. He sites three types of gaps, ‘the interdependency gap’—which deals with relationship building, ‘the justice gap’—which refers to ending both structural and direct violence, and ‘the process-structure’ gap—which deals with the way in which we dichotomise peace as either process or end-goal, wherein he argues that it is both. As it is particularly relevant to our discussion here, I will delve deeper into the first of the three gaps. According to Lederach, the repairing of relationships is a key aspect of peacebuilding, thus the majority of ‘relationship building’ is accomplished by encouraging counterparts, those of equal status, to meet (we may recognise the contact model here) and work together. Lederach has called this ‘horizontal relationship building’. The gap he describes exists in the building of relationships vertically, or ‘the lack of responsive and coordinated relationships up and down the levels of leadership in a society affected by protracted violent conflict’. (Lederach, p.2) He argues that the higher, middle and lower levels of leadership are interdependent; so too are the different methods they invoke in peacebuilding. The need then, is ‘to increase recognition that peacebuilding must link the multiple activities and actors from all levels of society and leadership circles’ (Lederach, p.3).
In line with what is already happening in feminist circles, I propose the bridging of the multitude of contact programmes discussed above. As well, further developing the network of peace work to include the feminist peacebuilding groups and community-based empowerment projects would also be beneficial to our project. The definitions for peacebuilding and education for social change, as discussed earlier, are interchangeable as contact programmes and social movements seem the only context for peace learning; integrating the practice is equally salient. Educational initiatives provide the transformative framework as necessary spaces for learning about peace and developing the capacity for co-existence. The feminist advocates and participatory projects provide the structural challenge necessary for empowering and mobilising peace actors, and incite agency in individuals and groups. Encouraging the interface offers what has until now been lacking in peace education programmes and NGO interventions thus far, (McCauley, 2002) a cross-cutting strategy for engaging a political will for peace. In creating organisational links between the multitude of associations of peacebuilding and peace education, those who leave workshops and educational programmes would have a space within which to articulate their new consciousness concerning the other. The different layers of peacebuilding become holistic as opposed to fragmented, and a sustainable alternative structure begins to grow.

According to Amartya Sen, ‘an agent is someone who acts and brings about change’ (Sen, 1995, p.19); the concern of peacebuilding efforts, and the special domain of educational peacebuilding models, is the encouragement of this capacity. In the midst of intractable conflict, agency is imagined and nurtured at the level of personal transformation, but embedding its practice systemically necessitates enabling structures. Unfortunately, the majority of NGO educational interventions seem to limit their efforts to this arena. Wherein, impacted as we are by large structural ‘powers that be’, our discussion is grounded in the establishment of conditions which might extend beyond the individual to influence the political will of entire peoples. I believe the newly emerging peacebuilding community that is beginning to organise itself in Israel and Palestine connotes the potential for this articulation. Despite the immense complexity of the conflict’s psycho-cultural influence, as well as social, economic and political relationships that act as constraints on the agency of the individual, small scale changes initiate the expansive reach of NGO activities—as they begin to organise as cohesive endeavours. The dialectic that weaves from individual impact to structural and systemic transformations manifests through the different links proposed above; they provide the potential for moving from ‘learning peace’ to ‘acting peace’. They make it possible to recreate and renegotiate the conditions necessary for the development of a culture of peace in the Middle East.

Notes

1. This is a term defined by Anne Goodman as a ‘complex interlocking set of problems that will have to be solved together if they are to be solved at all’ (Goodman, 1999), and seemed appropriate to use in this context.
2. The Zionist movement began in 1897 in Basel, Switzerland under the leadership of Theodore Herzl. The goal of Zionism was to establish ‘for the Jewish people a home in Palestine secured by public law’ (Kjeilin, 2003).

3. Another paradox emerges in this context: Conflict tends to springboard women’s liberation from traditional social constructions of gender, whereas it also embeds hyper-masculinities through socially sanctioned militarisation or gorilla violence, which is indeed the case in both Israel and Palestine. (Sharoni, 1999; Firer, 2003; Rubenberg, 2001; inter alia).

4. The loss of women’s rights to ‘exercise leadership on the political and social levels, rights won in periods of conflict’ (Bop, 2003) is discussed by women’s rights activist, Codou Bop as ‘the most extreme and most long-lasting of their losses’ (Bop, 2003).

References


