



## Journal of International Women's Studies

Volume 2 | Issue 3

Article 2

Jun-2001

# The Geopolitics of Race: Women from Palestine, Israel, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland Meet

Elise G. Young

---

### Recommended Citation

Young, Elise G. (2001). The Geopolitics of Race: Women from Palestine, Israel, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland Meet. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 2(3), 11-29.  
Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol2/iss3/2>

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

## **The Geopolitics of Race: Women from Palestine, Israel, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland Meet**

**Elise G. Young<sup>1</sup>**

There are six sections to this paper. I begin by introducing the history and goals of The Global Women's History Project and the Inaugural Conference reviewed in this paper. Second, I introduce the central theme of the paper, the geo-politics of race, and discuss the relevance of this theme to the outcome of the conference. Third, I explain my use of the term race. In the fourth section I introduce excerpts from delegates' talks expanding on the areas of challenge to coalition building- race, class, and taking responsibility for history- as well as documenting the successes of coalition building. Section five reviews strategies for resolving conflict introduced by delegates. In conclusion I return to and further develop the theme of race with which I began.

### Introduction

From April 13-18, 1999, women from Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland met with women from Palestine and Israel at the Inaugural Conference of The Global Women's History Project at Westfield State College in western Massachusetts. GWHP brings together women from war torn regions of the world with women in the United States to learn about one another's struggles, strategies, and visions, in the context of comparative analysis. These two regions were chosen for the Inaugural conference because of on-going research and activism of the conference organizers with women in these regions. Further, given the role of the United States government in both the Belfast and Oslo Agreements two areas needed to be addressed: links between U.S. domestic and foreign policy; and the importance of educating women about events in those regions given the effects of United States foreign policy.<sup>2</sup> My hope was that the conference would become the basis for forging on-going links between and among women from the regions represented, as well as between delegates and women from local grassroots organizations.

The Global Women's History Project originated as 'MNHAL (loosely translated as 'replenishment' from the Arabic), a not-for-profit created by myself and Magda Ahmad to bring together women from the Middle East with women from the United States to develop mutually beneficial projects in<sup>3</sup> areas such as health care and community organizing. After joining the History Department at Westfield State College, and in the course of organizing the conference described below, I decided to transform MNHAL into an organization that would include women of Africa, Asia, and Central and South America as well.

My impetus for creating MNHAL, in addition to my assessment based on years of activism, of the importance of creating such a linking mechanism between women from the Middle East and the U.S., was a visit by Dr. Salwa Najjab, founder of the Women's Health Project of the Union of Palestinian Medical Relief Committees, to a local grassroots organization, Nueva Esperanza in Holyoke, Massachusetts. Her conclusion based on this visit was that

Latina women living in the inner city have similar health issues as Palestinian women living under military occupation, and she was interested in exchange of strategies.

A second impetus for creating The Global Women's History Project was that the way in which we conceptualize historical conflict shapes the kinds of activism we engage in. Feminist analysis provides critical insight into the causes of war and is a basis for new kinds of activism. Yet, as many of us have experienced, the 'left' in general has resisted acknowledging the centrality of women and of feminist insight to developing strategies in relation to particular conflicts. The Global Women's History Project therefore brings together women to forge insights and strategies.

The two conferences held so far each had their own 'personalities.' The Inaugural conference was influenced by the desire of the organizer connected to Ireland to include women across the political spectrum. The choice of delegates from Palestine and Israel for this conference was based on my assessment of what at that particular historic moment would be most useful. Hence I invited women who had already been working across the nationalist divide. Because of my work with Israeli and Palestinian activists over the years I was connected to a network and the response was overwhelmingly positive. The lack of opportunities for women in the U.S. to meet with and hear the perspectives of Palestinian women and of Israeli Jews who work with Palestinians was another motivation. Hence, while the delegates from Northern Ireland and the Republic represented a range of political parties as well as two grassroots organizations, those from the Middle East were conversant with and affirming of one another's politics and work outside the formal political system. This difference in the delegations turned out to be illuminating in its own way.

The difficulties of carrying out the goals of GWHP are inherent in the politics out of which the necessity for such a project arises. The often-conflicting range of interests of women from so called First World and Third World countries depending on their class, age, experience, politics, and much more, are a rich source of analysis that is critical to developing activist strategies. The conference would provide us an opportunity to engage in that analysis and praxis, and would also mean that we would be faced with having to negotiate differences in the face of contexts that are often about life and death.

Over the period of the first year of GWHP organizing, I continued to refine the goals of Global Women's History and those goals are being further developed with the input of community and Board women involved. The Global Women's History Project is intended to be a vehicle for women who do not have access to media or to the general public here, women whose ideas and visions are most often erased from history. The task of making available information that is suppressed for political reasons, is daunting and is one of the reasons for the creation of The Global Women's History Project. This information is of course not confined to the area of women, but has to do with governmental control of media, and dispersion of hegemonic constructions of particular conflicts based on the interests of those in power. But historically meetings of women from around the globe have produced

important results that are most often suppressed by their respective governments. Yet, it is through exposure to one another's struggles and visions that it becomes possible to build on and support projects that are critical to the survival of women and children and their communities inside and outside of the United States.

Delegates to The Global Women's History Conferences are all engaged in activism addressing a range of issues: they deliver papers that both theorize their activism and engage their audience in learning, with consideration of how the issues raised can be constructively addressed in an on-going way. At the Inaugural conference discussed here, the talks were organized under four themes: Health, Education, Economic Development; Political Advocacy; Human Rights; Building Coalitions.

Given the fact that women globally face severe economic destitution, trafficking, violence in and outside of the home, and given the enormous toll on populations and on the environment, of on-going wars, it is especially important to ask what particular forms of activism women are engaged in and how those forms of activism can be supported. Further, given the 'First World-Third World' divide of geo-politics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, most women in the U.S. have little opportunity to benefit from learning about the lives and activism of women around the globe. In fact, delegates from both regions had little information about one another's conflicts, even though some Israeli and Palestinian women have been in contact with women in Northern Ireland. Women from the North and South of Ireland knew very little about the situation of Palestinian women in particular. (The delegate from Sein Fein was most conversant about the situation in Palestine.). I include here segments from our delegates' talks and encourage readers to contact us for further access to The Global Women's History archives.

### Historical Overview

The struggle for control of the island of Ireland has its roots as far back as the Norman invasion of England and subsequent claim of Henry II of England to make Ireland a part of his kingdom. The northern province of Ulster in Ireland managed to hold off military conquest by England, but eventually also succumbed. People from England, Scotland and Wales, most of whom were Protestant, colonized Ulster. The indigenous Irish, (who were Catholic), were pushed to the margins of land previously theirs. Historical developments such as the Act of Union, 1801; the Partition of the southern 26 counties; 1921; the founding of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association, 1967; The Troubles in the early 70's, have all reflected the complexities of alignments and notions of how to resolve injustices shaping the lives of those directly affected by this history.<sup>4</sup>Hence, the history can be defined from a range of starting points and those starting points would then become the fulcrum around which resolution is sought.

The war over Palestine has parallels. Great Britain, a colonizing power in the Middle East and Asia in the nineteenth century, issued The Balfour Declaration of 1917, which validated settlement of Palestine by the Jewish Nationalist Movement of Zionism. Zionism was a

European development in response to the history of Christian anti-Semitism in western and eastern Europe. After World War I, Great Britain was given the mandate (governmental control) over Palestine, until they withdrew in 1947. Zionists went to war and declared the state of Israel in 1948. More than eight hundred thousand of the indigenous peoples, predominantly Muslim, Christian, and some Jews, were driven from their land and became refugees. Historical developments have reinforced the landlessness and destitution of those indigenous peoples, the Palestinian Arabs. (Useful and detailed Fact Sheets on this conflict are available on the Internet through TARI Institute in Cambridge, Mass.) In this article Palestine refers to the original area that was appropriated by the Zionist state in 1948, and is not used to refer to the areas occupied in 1967 that are now defined as the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem, or Areas A,B,C.(designated under the Oslo Agreement as areas under PNA control, joint control, or Israeli control). Again, while brief overviews are necessary to situate the reader, readings of these histories are critical to political positions and human survival: hence they must be studied carefully.

### Obstacles to Peace: Racialized Identities and Nationalisms

Based on presentations and meetings at this conference there is no doubt that women within and between both regions share visions of freedom and equality; share common strategies for building coalition; and are extremely courageous in speaking out against violence and abuse. The resourcefulness, creativity, and 'far-sightedness' of the women at this conference affirmed what I have most often experienced in my own activism in the Middle East- that hope for our planet comes from the persistence of women's efforts. But again, women's visions and projects, as well as women's struggles, must be publicized and that is an extremely difficult task. The power of male dominated governmental bodies to inhibit women's activities and the persistence of the notion that men are naturally more fit for governing than women among both men and women in general, are on-going and often life-threatening challenges. Social and political obstacles to political engagement facing women from both regions were similar. At the same time women from both regions spoke of similar factors motivating their activism, many of which revolved around the particular responsibilities they have as women in areas of health care, education, and other aspects of daily survival. Most agreed that many women have skills particularly suited to compromise and negotiation based on daily experience in organizing large groups of people.

However, given the way in which events unfolded at this conference, it is impossible to 'idealize' the potential that women have for reversing war. Tensions surfaced between the Irish/Irish-British/British women because they rejected one another's assessments of how conflict arose historically, and because of differing allegiances to the parties involved. For example, some women in Northern Ireland identify as British, others as Irish. Secondly, tensions arose between the two delegations because, while the women from Ireland praised and sought United States support and involvement, the delegation from Palestine/Israel denounced the hypocrisy and one-sided support of the Zionist Israeli state by the U.S. government.

Thus differing interpretations of history and divergent allegiances in terms of class and what I will call 'race' as intrinsic to and embedded in constructions of nationalism, persistently overshadowed solidarity based on gender. As noted author, Political Scientist, and commentator at our conference, Dr. Joy James, noted, referring to the U. S. , "...in a nation that is so racialized, you assume a racial identity to become a part of the national culture." Her comments are discussed below. My goal in identifying and exploring the tensions described as racial is to clarify the way in which geo-politics are shaped by social-political constructions of race. These constructions are shifting and are not based solely on skin color. For example, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the United States both Irish and Jews (whether Ashkenazi-European or Arab) it was not unusual for Anglo-Saxons to refer to Irish as Black, or for Jews to be described as dirty, lazy, and cheap, in ways that Blacks were described. In Israel, race politics are embedded in the history: the founders of Zionism not only sought to establish a Jewish state, but in fact a Europeanized Jewish state based on separation of Jew from Arab and from African. The consequence is a hierarchical white/black topology where European Jews have the privileges of whites in a segregated society which separates out and treats Palestinians as black (in the context of a white dominated power structure) - that is, Palestinians have less access to resources affecting survival on all levels. Arab and African Jews also suffer discrimination and are on the bottom of the economic ladder. In Ireland some Nationalists identify their situation in relation to Unionists as analogous to those of African Americans in the U.S (and to Palestinians): they consider themselves the blacks of the struggle for control of Ireland because they suffer from discrimination in areas of housing, political rights, health care, etc. Race politics are critical to understanding the limitations and possibilities both for resolution of conflict in these regions and for alliance building between women. Further, those race politics emerged as both embedded in the history and central to current international politics affecting limitations or possibilities for resolution of conflict.

When I talk in this article about the geo-politics of race I am talking about political and therefore personal constructions of race as central to both domestic and international politics and the emergence of a world capitalist system with its attendant gender, race, class structures and inevitable wars. Colonialism was built on the pseudo-scientific racism of the nineteenth century that constructed dark skinned peoples as inferior. This history continues to inform modern nation states. This is expressed both in domestic politics in the United States where those on the bottom are kept there through various processes of colonization (for example, legislation that ensures rather than overcomes poverty for the largest number of people of color and women), or internationally. This is the history that shaped the creation of the state of Israel and its politics of exclusionism and racialism (for example, the exclusive Right of Return of Jews; discrimination against Palestinian Israelis discussed below; discrimination against Arab and African Jews). Race as an aspect of national politics that impinges on ethnicity and color, emerged as a central but often overlooked theme producing at times seemingly intractable divides between our delegations. But recognition and continued exploration of this theme, if it inspires praxis, can only reinforce the many deep bonds and truths that were articulated at this conference. My conclusion after organizing, attending, and listening to and reading conference papers, was that the politics of

race most clearly inhibited solidarity between women. I ground my definition of race in the experience that brought me to research, writing, and activism in relation to the historical struggle over Palestine. Because of the current crisis in Palestine (September, 2000), this article will focus on the geo-politics of race informing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and will include an update on Palestinian and Israeli women's activism in the current stage of the war over Palestine.

### Shifting Definitions of Race: Personal/Political Dimensions

In my own experience theory and activism are intrinsically, deeply, but in sometimes subtle, ways, intertwined and are based in life experience. In other words, living a life as a member of the body politic as we all do, we are constantly theorizing (whether consciously or not) our lives through the choices we make and how we make sense of our experience. For example, my involvement with the crisis in Palestine began in 1982 when the Israeli state invaded Lebanon. That was a turning point for many Jews in North America who had not been paying attention to the repercussions of the founding of the Zionist state in 1948. For many of us, our vision was blurred by a solidly, even if not explicitly, Zionist education in regard to who we are as Jews and in regard to history. Perhaps what is even more critical though to my involvement, was the notion of race that I grew up with or grew up into.

The lower middle class suburb of Boston I grew up in was a mix of Jews and those who we referred to as gentiles- a mix of Irish and those gentiles for whom we used the racialized terms of Yankee blue blood, or WASP. The Irish were closer to us because they were also immigrants with histories of expulsion and discrimination. Perhaps this was the reason for tensions and competition expressed in attacks on my father by his Irish peers when he was growing up, as well as the basis for the fact that many of his close friends were Irish. But it was the gentiles who were 'white' and who excluded us from their clubs, hotels, and circles of political power.

I was born as the survivors of World War One were staggering out of the death camps. I knew early on that our survival as a people was fragile - the Nazis had proven that in attempting to annihilate our entire 'race.' When the Jews at school didn't show up on Jewish holidays it was because we were different- not just in the sense of having different religious practices, but because the world was divided into two 'races,' Gentiles and Jews.

While my life revolved around Judaism, I was not raised as a Zionist. But I was raised with an implicit, assumed support for the state of Israel created just two years after my birth. My Synagogue collected money to plant trees in Israel in our names to affirm our place in the world, our new 'nationality'- for Jews were now a new kind of nation. But Nationalism in the twentieth century was intertwined with imperialism, the colonization of the third world, and the division of the world into 'underdeveloped and developed' These categories are based on the European historiographical model of modernization theory. Among other mythologies modernization theorists claim that Africa and the Middle East had no history- they were stagnant until the Europeans arrived. Long before I understood this racist typology, I

understood that the creation of a Jewish state was the fulcrum on which our defense of ourselves as a people was balanced. Ironically, because the early Zionist leaders affiliated themselves with the white dominated and male dominated European 'great powers' the creation of the state of Israel made us a 'white' nationality while at the same time it was meant to affirm our roots as Semites in the Semitic world. Zionism disclaimed our roots in Africa and the Middle East racially while at the same time claiming a 'God given' right to the land of Palestine. The resulting confusion among some North American Jews faced with these contradictions has sometimes resulted in racism among us, particularly among Jews of European descent toward Arab and African Jews (those who remained in the countries of Africa and the Middle East). This was a notion of race based on political, hence, economic, power.

The Zionist state gave Jews a seemingly firm foothold on a slippery slope of race relations. In the United States, color and body features were significant factors in finding acceptance in the worlds of the upper class Anglo, Christian power structure. We tried to straighten our hair. We tried to change the shape and size of our noses. We were racialized and we alternatively embraced and denied and attempted to eradicate this persistent fact. Many of us became politically active early on in the Civil Rights Movement perhaps because we implicitly understood, given our recent history, the necessity to align ourselves with people of color. Many did the opposite. In the mid-decades of the twentieth century and before, Jews in North America, supported by the creation of the Zionist state, attempted to become 'White' while benefiting from the fact that we were not 'Black.' Neither 'White' nor 'Black' our limitations and possibilities were shaped by social and political constructions of race that, in my mind, brought with them a range of responsibilities.

### Challenges of Coalition Building: Race, Class, and Rewriting History

This section of the paper surveys the critical themes of race, class and differing versions of history raised by delegates and illuminates theory and praxis they are engaged in. Three of our delegates Amira Hass (Journalist, Haaretz), Islah Jad (Director, Women's Studies Program, Bir Zeit University, Palestine), and Geraldine Smyth (O.P. Director, Irish School of Ecumenics, Dublin and Belfast), were asked to open the Envisioning Peace Conference with historical background to the respective conflicts. In her talk, Smyth noted that: "I didn't dare give a historical perspective.... I have such a range of colleagues here from Northern Ireland and from Ireland as a whole who would all read the history very differently..." Indeed divergent views of history, as noted earlier, were predictably a source of many difficult moments at the conference. But at the same time, in the unfolding of divergent readings of history certain persistent themes emerged to contextualize hegemonic views of political parties and nationalist perspectives. Three of those themes, introduced by Mary Nelis (Sein Fein) and Amira Hass (journalist, Haaretz), were: the historical context of class struggle; the history of racial genocide; and taking responsibility for history:

"...And that is where the fundamental problem lies-with the inability of either the British state or Unionism to recognize its part in the conflict. Instead of trying to propagate



the idea that the war was due to mindless terrorism-the IRA- or a criminal conspiracy or the propensity of the Irish to fight which is all about demonizing and scapegoating, it needs to be recognized that the conflict in Ireland is rooted in the unequal relationship between Ireland and England and in the abnormal and undemocratic nature of the Northern state itself.”

“I just want to say here that the bloody conflict did not affect everyone’s lives in the North. There were people who lived quite comfortably through the conflict. Nor was the conflict about two religious factions fighting with each other. Nor was it about issues affecting women from different religious backgrounds. Those who were in the front line of that conflict, those who died, those who went to prison, those who were tortured, those who had every right they had removed from them-they were the poor from both traditions. The professional middle classes were not affected to the same degree. Soldiers were not kicking down the doors, at six in the morning, in the Malone Road in Belfast....For women in the ghettos, however, life was a struggle just to survive, being ghettoized. It was hard for them then to be engaged in the issues affecting their lives when the structures and the laws of the state were organized to keep them almost in a state of perpetual slavery and certainly in a state of perpetual division.”

*Mary Nelis, Sein Feinn*

“.... The Palestinian society, the Palestinian people of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank have gone through an unbelievable, incredible, unprecedented process of impoverishment. You can just look at the scale of the G.N.P. and see how it is related to the closure and to days of closure.....This impoverishment created in Gaza more than ever and in the West Bank a huge army of a very cheap labor force...What is happening in Gaza, this process of impoverishment, fits into the new world order and into the structures which are unfolding all over the world but are not referred to as violations of human rights, because it has to do with something much more basic....the idea that accumulation of capital, of monies in the hands of few on account of labor, of the skills, of the life, of hours of leisure, and of the creativity of millions of others- nobody is challenging this idea now. It is considered something which is very normal and just. Whoever is able can accumulate capital and their wealth. I think this is the main reason why the policy of closure and the policy of depriving the Palestinian people under the guise and the emblem of the peace process has not attracted attention from the American media. It has nothing to do with Jewish power; it has nothing to do with the Jewish and Zionist interests in American media. It has to do with American media, with the interests of American capital and the other capitals of Europe and maybe also Indian (Asian) and maybe also some Palestinian millionaires who have the same interests.”

“This history of dispossession where people who are active in the movements against this to remedy or to remedy a bit of this dispossession-some of you must be thinking about it, living here in the States, that it is not unique to Israel and to Palestine. I go around here and think of how many Indian peoples must have lived here. Just one hundred and fifty or two hundred years ago. Where are they now? Just think about the tremendous dispossession of African blacks that your country, your state is involved with. Saying that this dispossession in our country is not unique of course is not a way of trying to ease it on our conscience....I say that

this comparison of Indians and Palestinians always occurs and always comes to the fore because, in it, you can see migrant peoples, peoples who suffered like the Irish in Ireland, who suffered from oppression, from hunger, from persecution, came to America and turned out doing so much injustice to other people, just as it happened to us....I just would say that for us, Israelis, me as a journalist, who does not hide her political affiliation, not party affiliation but political affiliation to the left wing in Israel, our fight now is to make Israel face, first of all morally, the tremendous injustice inflicted, the tremendous dispossession of Palestinians that we inflicted upon them in 1948. Our parallel goal and fight is to eliminate this currents of transference, this current among Jewish populations to see the disappearance of Palestinians from the country. Our third mission is to show how Israel has not yet given up its determination to dictate the Palestinian future because, by dictating the Palestinian future, it is easier to deny the past, to wait for some opportunity to come to pass and maybe the transference current will be able to rule again, as they did in 1948. We must expose this.”  
Amira Hass, Journalist, Haaretz

Geraldine Smyth introduced a fourth theme in her talk that was echoed by delegates from both regions:

“In Northern Ireland, one needs to raise some questions about the current vogue for, and, indeed, the wrongly named “single-identity work.”....There is no such thing, I would contend, as single identity as such....We are implicated across a rift that binds us, and I think there have been intimacy and tears even in that negativity.”

To put these themes into context, I begin this section of this paper with a brief survey of selected delegates’ talks. First is Olwyn Douglas (Progressive Unionist Party, Northern Ireland) whose comments illustrate the crisis of multiple identities referred to above by Geraldine Smyth. An illustration of the politics of race follows with excerpts from the talk of Sahar Francis (Attorney from Upper Galilee in Israel, and BADIL Resource Center) and that of Firdos Abu Issa (Dheishah Refugee Camp, Palestine). Arlene Foster (Ulster Unionist Party, Northern Ireland), Maggie Beirne (Committee on the Administration of Justice, Northern Ireland), and Ghada Zeidan (Women’s Affair Technical Committee, Palestine and Engendering the Peace Process), all address a subject that resonated with all of our delegates: redefining and implementing human rights, and how they are doing that Finally, Kate Ferron (Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition), Sumaya Farhat-Naser(Director, Marcaz Al-Quds Al Nisa, Palestine) and Ya’ala Cohen(Community Organizer. Bat Shalom, Israel) talk about processes of overcoming nationalist divides through building coalition.

Olwyn Douglas, of the Progressive Unionist Party began her talk asking- how did I, a Quaker, an artist, and a pacifist, end up being a member of a party that has a violent background? As an artist she believes that she can help Protestants take the journey she calls upon them to take, of working with their imaginations to reformulate and rearticulate who they are and what they are. Douglas also raised the issue of class struggle: a defining moment for her was her discovery of the social, economic, and educational impoverishment of working class Protestants. Her analysis was that some of the more extreme Protestant

leaders manipulated the working class into thinking that the way out was through sectarianism against their Catholic co-religionists rather than through working-class socialist politics. She looks back to history to provide models for how Protestants who feel betrayed by their leaders can take a new look at themselves, for example by recalling the radical Presbyterians in the 1790s who were the founding fathers of the United Irishmen movement. And many Presbyterians who refused to follow the Episcopalian church left Northern Ireland because of religious persecution. From this perspective taking responsibility for history can mean re-membering those aspects of our histories that can become a basis for solidarity across nationalist divides and for revisioning current events.

Race, class struggle, and rewriting history, plague lawyer Sahar Francis, a Palestinian whose family stayed in their homeland after 1948. She grew up in a world of “different opposite worlds of concepts,” studying the history of the Jews, celebrating Israeli independence Day, but forbidden from talking about what the actual circumstances of 1948- the war against the Palestinians or Nakbah or Disaster. All of her subjects in school were taught in Hebrew: she studied her own language, Arabic, only as another subject.

Sahar detailed discrimination she faces as a Palestinian, for example, she is not allowed to study certain subjects in University because of ‘security’ reasons. Scholarships are far fewer for Arabs. State insurance coverage is less, because Palestinians are not allowed to serve in the Army. Arabs cannot buy state land. Forty village in Israel are not recognized by the State and therefore do not get any infrastructure or social facilities. They are without basics of electricity and have limited access to water. These are villages of refugees who live within Israel who were forced to leave their own villages (which were demolished or renamed) and move to others. More than twenty-five laws in Israel discriminate against the Palestinian community. Moreover, when she won an award for her work in Science, the headmaster talked about the “genius of the Jewish mind”:

I was laughing behind, wondering if they knew that I was an Arab person because my name does not sound Arabic, especially Francis. They always called me at the university, and I said, “Sahar,” and when they hear that, they asked, “You are Arab?” and I said yes. But they said, “No, you are Christian; you are not Arab.” They always say that if you are Christian, you are not Arab because, for them, Arabs are just Muslims.

Monolithic identification of Arabs as Muslims is also a chronic problem in the United States growing out of persistent association in the media and by conservative governmental representatives, as well as academics, of both (Arab and Muslim) with terrorism and the targeting of both as enemies of the United States. The result is many forms of discrimination against Arab Americans- for example, control of movement, secret trials based on accusations without clear evidence- warranting a close look at how Arabs, and in particular, Palestinian Arabs, may have become in that sense the ‘blacks’ of contemporary geo-politics.

Arlene Foster of the Ulster Unionist Party tackled the issue of rights to land (at the core of

class struggle) in the context of definitions of human rights and the politics of ‘acceptable levels of violence.’ (There are two main Unionist Parties, the dominant Ulster Unionist Party and the Democratic Unionist Party, both of which oppose involvement of the Irish Republic in Northern Ireland, but have been unwilling to share power with non-Unionist parties.) She described the attacks by the I.R.A. on her family that drove them from their land. From this perspective, she asserted:

“...human rights, life, and liberty would very definitely be a subject for all people in Northern Ireland. Unionists, however, find it difficult to grasp the philosophy as a protection of human rights as something they should endorse and encourage. I believe this is because the generally accepted view of human rights within Unionism is too narrow. Human rights is not just the excess of government power...The abuse of human rights by terrorists of all shades in Ulster is something which has largely been ignored.

Foster’s view could be interpreted as inviting a revisioning of history that rejects rights for a few over rights for the masses. Yet, Irish Catholics driven from their land by Ulster settlers continue to suffer lack of rights that most Protestants have. Foster challenged a phrase often used by journalists in Northern Ireland- “an acceptable level of violence,” asking ...

”To whom is the level of violence acceptable? Certainly not the victims of violence. Often, government- if there are less than the average number of shootings, bombings- will accept that it is an acceptable level of violence for the workings of government....It is so important to have human rights seen as universal in Northern Ireland at this time, instead of segregating different subjects into the ownership of different communities. Human rights belong to Nationalists, policing belongs to Unionists- it really takes us nowhere. I see this as a challenge for the next few years, and one I hope I can be part of.”

If Unionists and Nationalists can agree on an agenda of human rights that is inclusive perhaps the issue of claims to land can also be renegotiated.

Redefining rights is a task intertwined with taking responsibility for history: the lives of women like Firdos Abu Issa are hanging in the balance between life and death waiting for the Israeli government to take responsibility for history. Firdos Abu Issa of Dheishah Refugee Camp in Bethlehem, a social worker who counsels women, described in detail the human rights abuses of refugee women suffering from domestic violence, loss of land, loss of relatives, poverty, lack of educational opportunity, lack of work, health problems, overcrowding leading to abuse. While the limitations and possibilities of all Palestinians are configured by the racial politics of the Zionist state described above, as a refugee and therefore a stateless Palestinian, she is even more vulnerable.

“In Gaza, for example, it is separate from the West Bank, and it is a closed area. The main problem of overcrowding is shown there- 638,560 inhabitants live in the Gaza Strip. Around 5,000 Israeli settlers live on 20% of the land. The rest are Palestinians. The settlers took the

most fertile land.”

Abu Issa also described the important role of Palestinian women in the planning, organizing, and sharing of activities during the 1987 Intifada. For example, when the Israeli government closed all schools, the women started popular schools in neighborhood mosques, and houses.

“Now, after the Intifada, women showed that they have started to work in a different dimension. We started to work in more scientific, more institutional, and more professional ways. We started to create our own institutions to take care of women’s mental health, to take care of women’s education, and to take care of women’s physical health....We have started to work in politics much more than before, because we have a lot of experience coming from the Intifada...”

Redefining and implementing rights is the focus of the work of Maggie Beirne of the Committee on the Administration of Justice, Northern Ireland, and a cross-community NGO created in 1981. Beirne believes that it is the work of NGO’s to influence political parties and that in order to do that it is extremely important to work internationally. The human rights agenda must connect to the equality agenda-

“...a commitment in the Good Friday Agreement is that all public bodies promote equality of opportunity regardless of religion or political belief, regardless of gender, disability, sexual orientation, marital status...”I don’t know whether the concept is very much used in the States, but the whole issue is often called “gender mainstreaming” or “human rights mainstreaming. This means that public authorities have to think in advance about the impact of their decision-making on all these different groups in society. How can they do that? Most of our civil servants are male, middle-aged, heterosexual, white, Protestant, able-bodied, married, 2.2. children, so how is this person sitting behind a desk going to actually work out the impact of these proposed policies on all these different groups? Well, they are going to have to go out and consult; the legislation says they have to consult.”

Her talk resonated with that of Palestinian activist, Ghada Zeidan, a member of The Women’s Affairs Technical Committee which has and continues to be a major grassroots organization advocating for Palestinian women. Zeidan focused her talk on a project that evolved out of the Fourth World Conference for women in Beijing, (1995), ‘Engendering The Peace Process’:

“(..this is the title of the project and the word engendering was really very carefully used because engendering is, in fact, revitalizing the peace process and also bringing into it the gender perspective) is an endeavor of women from Palestine, Israel, and the international community who share the commitment to transform the politics of power into politics of empowerment and participation, not only of women but those of women and men.”

Political Advocacy must include the community said Zeidan. Her organization, recognizing that the victimization of women in armed conflicts has increased in scope and intensity during the past ten years and before, facilitates the “central and active involvement of women in formulating conditions for peace and rehabilitation,” as a “key element in nations’ endeavors to bring about sustainable peace.” Engendering the Peace Process organizes women in the grassroots as well as involving women in official positions worldwide in support of reconciliation between Palestinian and Israeli peoples. In order to achieve the goal of actively involving women in peace negotiations and peace monitoring on all levels, internationally recognized conventions must be enforced. “The project draws in the inseparable link between justice, security, and peace.” (This assertion is particularly poignant in January of 2001 when communication between even Palestinian women from one village to another is impossible because of the Israeli blockade of the west bank and Gaza.) They began with a meeting of women in East Jerusalem in September of 1997 after separate meetings of women from both communities. Women such as Winnie Mandela and others from around the world gave their support to the process. To reach their objectives, work must be done in both communities on the grassroots level, international support is critical, particularly from the United States, the main broker of the current political process, and women’s political roles in the PNA must be enhanced.

Women from Northern Ireland who formed The Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition (1996) also aspire to bring together women from opposing communities- and have succeeded. Women “from across the political spectrum from Unionism and Loyalism to Nationalism and Republicanism and other women who were either not comfortable with those definitions or who rejected those kinds of identifying labels outright” gather together to explain their positions, according to Kate Ferron, who spoke at an earlier session. Kate filled in for Monica McWilliams, one of the founders of NIWC, who had to stay in Belfast when negotiations of the Belfast Agreement (1998) faltered that week.

As a coalition, NIWC brought women together under three broad principles of human rights, inclusion, and equality. How do they work? “When there are different positions in the room, we will ask different women to explain their position, not just state the position, but to give reasons why they hold the positions that they do and what they might need to have that position change and why they feel the need to maintain that position in a given context.” Most of the time, Kate explained, women come to some form of common understanding. “If I were to say anything about coalition building, it is to be firm in your principles and to take account of where you come from, and to know where you are going to and to be able to communicate with each other at all times.” The Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition played a major role in helping bring all parties to the table to negotiate the Belfast Agreement, even making it into the major newspaper published in Massachusetts, The Boston Globe.

“Who am I to speak with the enemy while the general consensus is that I am therefore a collaborator, a traitor?” Sumaya Farhat-Naser, Palestinian and Director of Marcaz Al-Quds Al Nisa, the Jerusalem Center for Women, addressed coalition building at the conference in her first public presentation in the United States. Established in 1991, The Jerusalem Link

consists of Bat-Shalom, an Israeli organization and Marcaz al-Quds Al Nisa, or The Jerusalem Women's Center, representing Palestinian women. The Jerusalem Link is the outcome of local and international conferences over a period of three years, of Palestinian and Israeli women with women from around the globe. "The aim [of Marcaz Al-Quds Al Nisa] is not to drink coffee with each other or dance," she explained. "Palestinian women meeting in Jenin, Nablus, Ramallah, Jerusalem, Hebron, work together in groups and then come together with Israeli women. The aim is to be able to do political activity, formulate joint plans, and formulate joint visions for a common future."

But based on her experience, Ya'ala Cohen who works with Bat Shalom on the Committee to End Land Confiscation and House Demolitions, believes that:

...."coalition building does not work for its own sake. It only works in context. There are times, perhaps, when dialogue is valuable for its own sake or when it's worthwhile for a coalition to be set up in order to put together a joint statement. This is true when that serves the political or other interests of both or all parties in the coalition, but this is not one of those times. The times we are in now call for much more than for a coalition to be able to work."

While women from both regions work hard for equity, justice, and human rights across nationalist, community, class divides, and while some delegates asserted that women are more likely to have the necessary skills for power sharing, a threat to male dominated elites and political parties, such skills are not always sufficient. First world/third world geo-politics require of women more than just 'getting along.'

### Strategies for Resolving Conflict

Problems raised and solutions to those problems posed by women from both regions live in the context of geo-politics informing the struggle for control of labor and resources and the attendant race, gender, class systems of capitalist economics. A key point and one that could clear the way toward analysis of those politics was made by Israeli journalist Amira Hass who spoke about the need to go beyond solving everything according to nationalist parameters. That the value of equality supercedes that of nationalism is clearly germane to any prospects for peace. The Israeli and Palestinian working classes could then identify common cause. For some delegates Sein Fein and Hamas are not the cause of violence, but rather class struggle, poverty, disenfranchisement.

May Blood from The Shankill, Northern Ireland, asserted that activists can change political parties, a theme echoed by others from Ireland and one which might be addressed in both contexts. Many agreed that language can be a weapon used to exacerbate conflict: for example, the word 'peace' is seemingly neutral, but is ideological in that it reflects the interests of those who hold the power of the pen and the purse.

Are Great Britain or the U.S. government "honest brokers?" While this question is critical on many levels, Dr. Janice Raymond, noted author and Director of The Coalition Against

Trafficking in Women as review speaker addressed an often overlooked aspect of this question in its particular application for women: “We also face the fact that sometimes the peacekeepers are the rapists and the traffickers, as for example when U.N. peace keeping forces in Bosnia visited the Serbian rape camps and used the woman sexually.” Such atrocities illustrate just one aspect of the fact that war cannot be solved until all aspects of control of women are addressed both analytically and on the ground.

Another kind of ‘trafficking’ is that of co-optation, favors, and privileges- typical of colonial politics. Speaking of the two and a half million Palestinians deprived by the Zionist state of freedom of movement since 1991, Amira Hass noted:

“Then you have some Palestinian officials. There are those who get a permit for three months or a permit for one day or a permit for a lecture or a permit for a conference...The highest category- the one which enjoys the largest portion of this privilege of freedom of movement- is the high officials of the Palestinian authority. This privilege was part of the what’s called peace agreement...There is V.I.P. category one, V.I.P. category two, V.I.P. category three.”

Polarized in the wake of imperialism, women from Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland and women from Palestine and Israel meet across the history of the east/west divide carved by colonial politics. Of the many lessons to be learned from our Inaugural conference, the need to challenge the geo-politics of race is one of the most salient. Enormous disparities in wealth infecting societies globally and a military industrial complex controlled by the U. S. and other governments in the First world, fosters subtle and overt conflicts of interests between women who benefit and those whose survival is threatened. Joy James clarified this point in her review talk.

### Conclusion: Confronting the Geo-Politics of Race

African American writer and activist Joy James was asked to help us clarify connections between international and domestic politics in her review of the delegates’ presentations. She spoke, as Maggie Beirne had, but in another context, about those people who exist on the bottom because of state policies and about the necessity to give them “more space and increasing our ability to listen to their dissent.” Grounding us in the geo-politics of nation-state building she underscored the contradictions of living in “domestic spaces that are policed and heavily racialized” as “a lens through which you look at U.S. foreign policy as also somewhat racialized.” In the long, on-going, and brutal struggle for rights, African Americans and others have been vilified, assassinated, and forgotten. Bringing into sharp relief the geo-politics that inform the trajectory of current events in both Ireland and the Middle East she noted:

“It is a very curious thing to sit here and hear one group of people testify to the role the U.S. has played in their peace process and to hear another group of people speak to how destructive the U.S. has been and their sense of dignity and justice.....What do we do to Iraq-



I don't know if it's half a million yet who have died- in terms of the embargo and its incredible impact against children and the elderly, the most vulnerable and the whole destruction of infrastructure. The way they rally people to be against a particular form of genocide- as important as Kosovo is, the hypocrisy is sometimes difficult to look at without blinking."

In this context the social-political construction of whiteness and blackness as it applies to Israeli and Palestinian women as monolithic groups and as it applies to the historical evolution of perceptions of the Irish in the U.S. speaks most cogently to the sources of conflict that women must address in our quest for alliance and coalition building. I now return to this theme in relation to a critical but often ignored aspect of the history of the conflict over Palestine.

When Zionist Bernard Lazare in the 1880's, as Jewish Zionist Hannah Arendt noted, called for the Jewish nationalist movement to be a movement of the people, by the people, and for the people, aligning itself with 'third world' nationalist movements rather than with the 'great powers,' he was speaking about the geo-politics of race that were shaping modern nation-state building. While he may have been idealizing third world nationalist movements, his politics were prescient, as were those of Hannah Arendt who opposed the establishment of a Jewish majority and Palestinian-Arab minority in Palestine asserting that the Zionist state would become a highly militarized state in that case, constantly at war. It was not a religious war she feared, but one arising out of lack of economic and political parity.

Non-Jewish Zionists in Great Britain supported the Balfour Declaration of 1917 giving the Zionist movement the right to create a homeland in Palestine because they believed in the Second Coming of the Messiah based on the return to and subsequent conversion of Jews in Palestine. While this ideology is based in religion it has racial overtones. One response of Jews facing immigration quotas and racial attacks in Great Britain was to prove that they were as white as the most respectable Anglo-Saxon. Military might aligned with economic power would for some Zionists wash the color from the faces of their compatriots and put at least some control of the triage of color dominating imperialist politics in the nineteenth century in the hands of Jews. But this choice to align with the great powers, did not save Jews from the stench of the ovens consuming the flesh of peoples of color around the globe. And the history of Arab Jews and of Mizrahi Jews in general has become submerged and distorted to fit the geo-political goals of the alliance between Zionism and Great Britain. Nor will similar choices today save Jews who are climbing a slippery ladder balanced by governmental bodies such as the U. S. government that utilize the Israeli state for its own strategic purposes.

Some women who immigrated in the late 1800's and early 1900's to Palestine as Zionists made connections between gender politics and race politics of state building. In the early part of the twentieth century strikes in factories were initiated by these women who saw a connection between their low wages and that of Arabs working for Jews. One of the first

grassroots organizations formed by women in 1948, Tandi, took an anti-racist position. But the legacy of the pseudo-scientific racism of the colonial period continues to infect the modern nation state as evidenced by the on-going struggle of women and of peoples of color in general for human rights and economic survival. Jews and Irish alike have experienced the ramifications of this history in the United States where both, at times the 'Blacks' of class warfare, benefited from legislation that favored whites over blacks in areas of housing and education. Perhaps then, Jews from European backgrounds who can never forget how social constructions of race have shaped our destinies, and Irish women "embraced by white America" ("and you know it is very different from decades ago when there were signs that said, "No Dogs and No Irish"), can re-member our histories and form alliances in service of exposing and ending racist politics and policies, thus creating the possibility for new visions of social organization and economic justice in their regions.

In the winter of 2001, a Palestinian in the United States is being held in detention by the INS under threat of deportation: because he is stateless and therefore has no country to which to return, he is under threat of a life sentence. It has been reported that at one point immigration officials attempted to justify his detention by accusing him of being a terrorist. In the winter of 2001, Palestinians are suffering a similar 'detention' and subsequent 'life sentence' as a result of the siege of their villages, cities, and homes by the Israeli Defense Force. A few days ago, Ella, a ten year old living in the village of El Sawiya in the west bank, experienced severe pains in her stomach. While her family begged to have the roadblocks removed so that they could take her to a hospital, they were refused. Every route they tried to take they were turned back. A few hours later she died. The cause was a burst appendix. The cause was the fact that Palestinians are the blacks of the twentieth century struggle for control of resources, strategic assets, and in particular oil, in the Middle East.

In war women have a difficult time reaching one another across nationalist divides not only ideologically, but practically. Yet, they continue to find common cause as women and as people of conscience. On December 29, 2000, a mass rally, vigil and March was held in Jerusalem called by Bat Shalom and The Coalition of Women for a Just Peace. Joined by a delegation of thirty six from Italy, thousands of women issued a list of demands including opposition to militarism that permeates Israeli society, equal rights for women and all residents of Israel, an end to occupation, full involvement of women in negotiations for peace and more. In November, Bat Shalom hosted Winnie Mandela who came to show her solidarity with Israeli and Palestinian women of peace, and seven women from the members of the European Parliament who came on a fact finding mission to the region. Numerous solidarity actions by Jewish and Palestinian women have been undertaken in the course of the last four months of the current siege of Palestine.

What will it take for these actions and those of coalitions of women in Ireland, to stop the killing and to institutionalize justice? Analysis is critical to action. How we construct the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or the conflict over the island of Ireland determines the kinds of activism we engage in. Neither is the result of religious enmity. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not about an eternal enmity between 'Jew' and 'Arab.' The inherent racism of that

construction reveals a deeper truth and a critical historical development- the separation of Jew from Arab. To return to the words of Mary Nelis and Amira Hass: instead of trying to propagate the idea that the war was due to mindless terrorism-the IRA (one could read this Hamas)- or a criminal conspiracy or the propensity of the Irish (one could read Palestinians) to fight, which is all about demonizing and scapegoating, it needs to be recognized that the conflict in Ireland (one could read Palestine/Israel) is rooted in the unequal relationship between Ireland and England (Israel and the Palestinians) and in the abnormal and undemocratic nature of the Northern state itself.

Amira Hass put it this way: I say that this comparison of Indians and Palestinians always occurs and always comes to the fore because, in it, you can see migrant peoples, peoples who suffered like the Irish in Ireland, who suffered from oppression, from hunger, from persecution, came to America and turned out doing so much injustice to other people, just as it happened to us.” The military hardware used by the I.D.F. (Israeli Defense Force) today is made in the United States. We have a historical legacy as a basis for insight and action and we currently are faced with conservative political alliances domestically and abroad that impel us to organize against injustice globally. The Global Women’s History Project is a vehicle for initiating theory and praxis uniting women who are dedicating their lives to achieving global peace.

For a list of the twenty delegates attending the April 1999 conference, see Conference Review by Elise G. Young in *Middle East Women’s Studies Review*, Association for Middle East Women’s Studies, Vol.XIV, No.2, Summer 1999.

For more information on women in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, see the following by Dr. Catherine B. Shannon, History Department, Westfield State College, Co-Director of the April 1999 Inaugural Conference of The Global Women’s History Project, as well as her forthcoming book on women in Ireland:

‘Women in Northern Ireland,’ in *Chattel, Servant or Citizen*, Edt. M. O’Dowd and S. Wichert, 1995.

‘The Woman Writer as Historical Witness: Northern Ireland, 1968-1994’ in *Women in Irish History*, eds. M.G.Valliulis, M. O’Dowd, 1997

‘The Changing Face of Cathleen in Houlihan: Women and Politics in Ireland, 1960-1996’ in *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Ireland*, eds. A.Bradley, M.Valiulis, 1997

For detailed information on Palestinian and Israeli women, see:

Bat Shalom website: <http://www.batshalom.org>

Women’s Affairs Technical Committee in Palestine website: [www.pal-watc.org](http://www.pal-watc.org)

Keepers of the History: Women and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, Dr. Elise G. Young (Teachers College Press, 1992)

For a review essay on literature by Palestinian women and about Palestinian women see the introduction to Suha Sabbagh, Palestinian Women in the West Bank and Gaza

Bibliographies for books, articles, speeches by and about both Israeli and Palestinian women are available on line.

April, 2000, The Global Women's History Project brought women from South Africa together with African American women. Our October 2001 conference brings women together from India and Pakistan. For more information and to get involved contact: Dr. Elise G. Young at [elise@javanet.com](mailto:elise@javanet.com)

---

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Elise G. Young, History Department, Westfield State College, Co-Director with Dr. Zengie Mangaliso of The Global Women's History Project, is a Middle East historian, writer, and activist, and poet. She is author of *Keepers of the History, Women and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* and numerous articles on women and state building in the Middle East.

<sup>2</sup>The Belfast Agreement, sometimes referred to as The Good Friday Agreement was signed in multi-party negotiations in 1998 and was highly publicized in the United States because of the involvement of U.S. governmental officials in helping to broker the Agreement. The Oslo Agreement signed by Arafat and Rabin in a highly publicized ceremony on the White House lawn in 1993, was the basis for what has come to be known as 'the peace process.' For detailed discussion of these Agreements and their implications see the bibliography at the end of this paper.

<sup>3</sup>For further information see 'Conflict in Northern Ireland: A Background Essay, John Darby in Facets of the Conflict in Northern Ireland, ed. Seamus Dunn, Macmillan, 1995.