

Vacation from War

Summer 2008

Steps toward the Concrete Utopia of a Peaceful World

Breaking Barriers Women's seminar - Darmstadt 2008 Facilitator's reports

Compiled and commented by Helga Dieter

Also in the women's seminar we just received reports from the Israeli facilitators. There might be many reasons for this fact to speculate on. Thus the following reports of the two moderators Lisa and Gili are seen from an Israeli perspective. We publish both reports in the original. Of course there are repetitions but also differences of interest.

In all the descriptions the extraordinary commitment and the professional quality of the young facilitators can be perceived. All the colleagues in our grassroots initiative work on a voluntary base and just receive a pocket-money. Also various other matters concerning accommodation or the contents of our activities are different from other projects which are sponsored by public money or private foundations.

The time-table and structure of the contents is similar in all our groups. After two or three days full of work there is an excursion (sightseeing in cities, a boat trip, a walk, a visit to a museum or a memorial-place as well as a daytrip across an invisible border to Amsterdam, Strasbourg or Brussels).

In my summary - with some explaining remarks - the reports are shortened without marks.

Gili, Israeli facilitator

The Breaking Barriers women's seminar in Darmstadt was the second one of its kind. The first one, in 2007, was a dream come true, and sort of experiment that was very successful. We learned a lot from that pilot seminar, and sat together – Palestinian and Israeli facilitators (most of which took part in last year's women's seminar either as facilitators or participants) – to make this year's program even better. We thought a lot about what would be the right way to integrate issues regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict alongside issues of gender, and, of course, the intersections between them.

I came to this seminar feeling: I already know what it's going to be like. I've been there last year, and saw how it worked. Surprisingly, it was a whole different experience, unique on its own. This year's seminar was not only breaking barriers, but also breaking points and breakthroughs. It was full of challenges, unexpected developments and in depth work. We worked in 3 groups of 12 participants (6 Palestinians and 6 Israelis) and 2 facilitators (one from each side). I facilitated a group with Asil, and we worked pretty well together.

Our group seemed to break the ice a little earlier than the others, and very soon they were deep into very honest expressions of personal and collective stories, as well as strong emotions, difficulties to hear the other side and conflicts. We reflected to them that there has to be a certain amount of trust for such things to come up so quickly, and as time went by this trust could be felt by the participants and it opened space for many other things to unfold. The "one on one" every morning – 15 minutes in which one Palestinian-Israeli pairs (changing every day) could discuss whatever

they wanted to – was very important in the trust building process. It gave space to the personal along side the political, and many women were surprised by how easy it was to talk to each other.

The Israeli group was pretty heterogeneous, more than what I usually come across in other conflict related seminars. Many people who attend such seminars come from a rather left wing environment and outlook at the situation. Many times they come from a place of guilt and shame and are willing to listen to Palestinian stories and contain them. This sometimes gives the Palestinian participants a sense of recognition, but in my eyes there is something lost in that dynamic, because Israelis don't always express everything that's on their mind, and some of the process does not happen on a deeper level. In our group this year some Israeli participants came with a preconception that they were left wing and their self-definition was challenged and shifted several times. It was hard for some of them to express what they thought and felt, fearing they do not fit into the "left wing tone" of the seminar. These things came up more easily in the original group setting, when we sat together only the Israelis in the group.

It was difficult to find a balance between constantly reflecting the existing power relations to the Israeli women and also allowing them to express their own pain and ask for an open ear from the Palestinian side. This raised a lot of resistance, on both sides. There were several major breaking points in the seminar, some of them in the small groups, and some in the big groups after we had a joint session or movie. The main points were around the Holocaust, the Nakba and issues concerning sexuality. I heard many of the Israeli participants saying "I can't take it anymore", "I don't want to see them again" and "I want to go home". It was really amazing to see how every day someone else felt frustrated and hopeless and even more amazing to see that change completely a day later. The feeling was that it was very intense and not taken for granted. Once barriers were broken, something real and powerful happened.

The most heartwarming moments were those after the calming down from a conflict, when women were more open to sharing and hearing small personal stories, which seemed too minor to mention in the formal discussion, and turned out to be very meaningful and empathy promoting. It was sometimes hard for the Israeli participants to grasp and understand the meaning of the Israeli occupation of Palestine. At times they said it felt too big from them to digest, at times they were defensive and heard what the Palestinians were saying as slogans they found hard to connect to, especially when the things said were part of a constructed workshop on a specific.

But when little bits of information came up between the lines, they hit very close to home. For example, the women in our group were talking amongst them about a shirt one of the women was wearing. A Palestinian participant said she has a very similar shirt which she wanted to bring along with her to the seminar but couldn't, because they had no water in her home in Ramallah on the days before she left, so she couldn't do her laundry. The Israeli participants were shocked that this was her daily reality and asked a lot of questions in order to understand the complexity of the situation. It was new to them, and they could listen to it without being defensive. Water and laundry was a day-to-day necessity they could relate to, and could therefore actively and openly listen to much more information about the structure of the occupation, who calls the shots and what the implications are to people's daily lives. It's these little unexpected things that help open us to each other, and give way to going further and deeper into each other's life – personally and politically.

In my opinion there was a good balance between topics regarding the conflict (which are the majority of the schedule) and topics regarding gender. These are of course intertwined, but focussing on different aspects allowed a more delicate and nuance expression of what it means to be a woman in a conflict area, and this led to greater closeness and understanding between women from both sides. One of the exercises that integrated the two themes was the "steps exercise" in

which the facilitators read out loud different statements regarding certain experiences (such as “I can move freely from one place to another”, “I can choose who to be in a relationship with”, “I have the freedom to...”) and whoever related to a certain sentence takes a step forward (or backward). This reflected existing power relations, allowed to see differences as well as similarities, and opened a door to a beautiful and meaningful discussion about basic living conditions, human rights, women’s rights and even sexual abuse – which is a topic we are very careful in raising in this setting. Many tears were shed in this exercise, as well as in other sessions, and it was very empowering to see what came out of it.

It was really a wonderful process to witness and accompany, and very different from last year’s seminar. In our group it really felt in the end that barriers were broken, that women were genuinely interested in hearing and understanding each other, and able to talk about very sensitive matters. There was a mutual wish to discuss ways of keeping in touch and working together to change the situation in Israel-Palestine. As it often happens, after two weeks of very intensive working and living together, it was difficult to say goodbye. It’s not easy investing yourself for two weeks in such a deep process, and then, suddenly, leaving the unrepresentative micro cosmos that allows us to live, for a brief moment, in a setting that is denied us in our own region.

Lisa , Israeli Facilitator

The seminar started with ice-breaking activities at Saturday morning 9/8/08, one night after the arrival of the 18 Israeli women group, and two days after a long and tiring journey that the 18 Palestinian women group went through to get to Germany. The reasons for coming to this seminar were diverse, yet most, if not all of them wanted to leave the conflict behind and become friends.

To write this report is not objective in any way- I feel the need to write: it reflects my opinion of the conflict and activism work, including this facilitation in the seminar. I don’t believe in human objectivity, therefore this will be my private point of view.

There are different parts I will refer to in this seminar. One is the tandem-cooperation.. This was the first time that I’m facilitating a group in conflict. We did not have enough time and possibility to meet and talk before the seminar.

It was strongly sensible in the beginning, as there were some problems with the film that was taken in Eliana’s and Ayat’s group. We couldn’t start with a small conversation of getting to know each other in the group that will work together in those next two weeks, as we planned. Daa (the Palestinian coordinator and my co-facilitator) had to deal with organizing those problems. So when we started it was in a mess and I did not pay enough attention to the group and the co-facilitation with all the power relations that do not pass us. Since this was at the beginning, I saw a pattern of misunderstanding that did not leave enough room for reflecting and deepening the work. It’s not the only reason, but one of those concerning the atmosphere, that made the workshops less effective, such as political issues brought up in an unformed way.

Of course, finding time to talk to each other was not easy at all, between the intensive workshops, the different personal crisis in each group, the organizing work, the basic living conditions, the team meetings etc. We stole a minute every now and then and tried to talk a bit, in many ways. I think we also succeeded in our co-facilitation: the cooperation got better, not only in equal guidance, but in attention, body language and expectations.

Personally I learned a lot: about power managing, about awareness to the two sides of one group, to semantics, body-language and communication. My work in this seminar turned out to be much more one sided. With the power relations and all the emotional stress we were all in, I couldn’t

know a lot of what is going through the Palestinian group and therefore I couldn't really help them in the process. I was often misunderstood and misinterpreted. Therefore I can mainly refer to the Israeli "original group".

In this group the process was not easy and not uniform, the group, deliberately, was heterogenic. In a group of 6 Israeli women there were many different voices. Some more right-wing, some more left-wing, different socio-economic-ethnic background. But all of them never met a Palestinian person before, none of them had a lot of knowledge or awareness of the political, nor historical situation in Israel-Palestine, the enormous gap between the sides and the Israeli power. In admission, they went through a deep process of awareness of their own place in the society, their personal identity, Their view point and responsibility.

I think that the process went in a spiral of peaks and balance. The first peak was at the second day with the personal narrative. Until that, it was more about getting to know each other and different ice-breaking activities, which were very important. The personal narrative gave the starting point of a long and painful process of listening, feeling and thinking, that I hope, is still going on. The Israeli stories were mainly about T.V. and the military service. The Palestinian stories were unbearable. They were disgracing and shocking. The stories had to do with occupation, violence, humiliation, curfew, helplessness and constant invasion to every part of their lives, even the most sacred, intimate and personal ones – murder and sexual harms. The Israeli group, in my opinion, could not listen very openly, knowing their side and thinking of respond. The personal sharing, though, does not leave a lot of space to hide behind ideas, hate and fear. Still, it made the Israelis feel insecure and confused. When the process widened to larger circles of family, nation and history, it was much harder to get to that point of listening and identifying. That was important in the process of understanding the complicity of the situation.

The sessions of the small original (Israeli) group gave a place for that kind of reflection, and being open about their feelings and thoughts. Not all of the participants felt comfortable to speak in the joint discussions. Even though they had different ideas, feelings and disagreements, this group was able to do a very good listening and reflecting work. They have noticed things like questions of indicating this process about the conflict in reality, they were open to criticism, new ideas and feelings.

The most difficult part of the seminar for them was the historical narrative and 1948 workshop. They were really ashamed and unsecured in their ignorance. It seems like they felt constantly attacked. In the original group they felt free to criticize each other and issues such as religion and the Israeli education system that sacred death and holocaust. But in front of the Palestinians they felt the need of justification, and used exactly the things they were criticizing before. With the continuation and deepening of the process, most of them could abandon their fear and just listen. Two of them still felt like they needed to be listened as well, and wanted their pain as soldiers to be empathized.

The lecture about German history from Helga was also a high point of the emotional process, in my group they took it really hard. In the specific context of meeting Palestinians, who consider to be the enemy back home, in Germany- they felt like taking a few steps back in the process and not being able to return. The feeling of being victims rose up from the depth.

The film "Arna's children" was another peak point that made different changes in the group. The fact that we made a big discussion for everyone after it, helped them for more ideas to debate. As the group was very strong in listening, understanding and opening, some felt differently, but couldn't express it in front of the group- the big group gave them that power and conformation,

though, of course, I could see from the side how much power they had in words and place in the group, at any way.

The gender subject was integrated in the process, in my eyes, in a right way. It was brought up in the identity necklace at first, as well as the sexual orientation, that became a big issue in my group, for two of them were lesbian and felt vulnerable. The Palestinians were curious and embarrassed, but we did not delay to talk about it, so there was some gap in that issue. But the gender field opened up earlier, at the second day, with Eliana's lecture about feminism and Diaa's brief coverage of Islamic feminism that opened the discussion about our different views, and our role in societies dominated by man. We discussed the connection of gender to societies in conflict, to different cultures and history, we thought about our bodies and how they are used in the mass media, our role in families, our personal life and how it is connected to the political life, equality etc. The gender workshop was very successful in my group, it opened up different canals of thoughts and discussion, about difference and equality between the sexes, and allowed a brief brake from the conflict. It enabled different voices to come up, they didn't need to be one voice, and made a connection between all women.

The conflict analyzing activities were not all taken seriously, the participants were either tired, or cynical about it.

I was trying (not easily) to summarize a process composed of particular women – a world full of liars, contradictions and hopes - individual emotions, thoughts, discussions, behavior etc.

My personal report: This process was the most significant and hard process of responsibility I've ever done. It was a work of manipulation between so many needs, we had to be in an intensive dialog- between the staff, with the group, with individual women and incidents, with ourselves.

I think, in that part, we also did a good job. Fixations melted, hearts and minds were opened, cognitive actions were taking to replace violence.

I learned a lot. Responsibility is my designation.

Thank you.

Lisa

Danna , Israeli Student

In summer 2002 I first got to know "vacation from war project". It was after the beginning of the second intifada and as an Israeli, it was important for me to understand and hear the reality as it is being experienced from the other side of the conflict. That meeting was a turning point for me as here, I started realizing that there were many things that I didn't know regarding the current reality experienced by the Palestinians under the occupation regime, the history of the place I was born and raised in and actually about my own society as well. Since then, I started to facilitate and coordinate Israeli – Palestinian encounters in this initiative and in some others. I started doing so since I wanted to give people the same opportunity I was given: understanding the reality I live in, dealing with questions that are part of me and part of the society through direct meeting with Palestinians. As in our daily reality those meetings are rare, the opportunity provided by "vacation from war" project is very important and unique one.

The last summer I was not facilitating but rather observing the women's meeting and interviewing the participants as part of my field research for my MA thesis dealing with experiences of Israeli and Palestinian women as part of the Israeli Palestinian conflict and as women in their own societies. Through those interviews, I was able to realize the amazing process which was experienced by women from both sides. The women meeting provided a safe place for those women, in which they could discuss not only about the conflict but also about their experiences as women in their own societies.

In order to demonstrate the importance of this process, I would like to focus on one of my Israeli interviewee, Anat¹. She is a 20 years. She started the interview from telling me that she was actually putting bombs on airplanes as part of her military service. As part of her reality as part of the Israeli society, until the seminar, she did not connect her military service to the conflict but rather saw it as something that she is doing as part of her social commitment. Moreover, she told me that she used to see the Palestinians not as humans and used to be happy whenever she heard that they are being killed. She used to think that "a good Arab is a dead Arab". However, in the meeting, she had realized that the Palestinians are humans as she is. Moreover, she used to think that their main aim is to kill the Jewish Israelis. During the meeting, it was the first time for her to hear that they were evacuated from their houses in 1948. She was shocked to realize it and of course that it changed her perspective as she realized that the current situation is a result of historical occasions rather than the "nature" of the Palestinians.

This woman is only one example from many other women who participated in this meeting, and only one woman out of millions which I wish would have been able to join those encounters.

¹