

Women Activists Special Nation-wide Conference - August 19, 2014, Haifa

In the midst of violence and difficult times, Mahapach-Taghir held a special nation-wide conference with the objective of providing an opportunity to air difficult feelings and think together of possible future activities in Palestinian and Jewish communities. The current political situation is affecting and challenging our communities in profound ways - both on personal and communal levels. These include fear and personal insecurity as well as continued exclusion processes of marginalized communities, through violence and incitement faced everywhere - in the streets, at work and online.

The meeting was not easy. Although these Mahapach-Taghir activists have known each other and worked together for a long time, recent events in Israel and the war in Gaza have increased mutual suspicion and fear. Many women were reluctant to attend the meeting, concerned that the external atmosphere would be reflected and replicated during the discussions. Moreover, the meeting place was carefully chosen in order to allow women from all communities attend the conference freely, thus we chose not to meet in a particularly Palestinian or Jewish community. Still, many women avoided the meeting.



The themes raised during the discussions were challenging to process. Women expressed their fear and lack of control over the situation. They also related to the deep sense of confusion in the light of local events. The conference provided a safe space for discussion and an opportunity to overcome these fears.

A Jewish woman from the Florentine community said: "I have always been around Arabs, working and living with them, but with war ongoing and such disasters taking place, I am torn apart. I am in pain for the catastrophe in Gaza and I am in pain for the soldiers killed. We are women. These are the wars of men. We want a future for our children." Her son serves in the army and is stationed near Gaza.

A Palestinian woman from Yaffat el'Nassera said: "My daughter asked me, 'If we need to leave here-- where will we go? And if the Jews had to leave here-- where would they go?' And I answered her that we don't have a choice, we have to live here together in peace."

A Jewish woman from Kiryat Yovel described her experience: "I posted on Facebook that violence against Palestinians in the streets must stop and that we, Jewish and Palestinian mothers and women, must act against this. I received many violent and negative responses and eventually had to erase the post."

A Palestinian woman from Florentine community said: "I don't want to live in fear. Both here and in Gaza we want to live in peace. We can live together. One day I saw a graffiti in my building that said, 'death to Arabs'. I am the only Palestinian in the building. I was afraid for my children when the alarms went off, but I also thought of the people in Gaza who would die. I felt that the soil is full of blood and waited for rain to come and wash it all off. I was waiting for a miracle from God."



These powerful testimonies and others led to an understanding that the sense of fear and pain is mutual, and that as women we are all interested in fighting for our right to live safely and quietly, without compromising other women's well-being and security.

Toward the end of the meeting the group discussed possible actions that can bring about positive change. One idea was to print a publication in both Hebrew and Arabic with personal stories of Mahapach-Taghir activists. The aim of this newsletter would be to share stories of successful partnership in activism, and to show other women the strength of solidarity. Another idea mentioned was to hold a joint summer camp each year for Mahapach-Taghir's Palestinian and Jewish children. Women at the conference expressed concern that with rising racism and segregation in Israel, their children do not have opportunities for meeting children of other identities. An annual Mahapach-Taghir summer camp would provide the children in our communities with such an opportunity. We hope that this camp will become part of our programming for 2015.



Participants at the conference left with a strong feeling of the potential for future partnership and positive action in the face of recent violence. The conference reminded us all of the power of Mahapach-Taghir activists and our unique partnership model. Being together provided hope in dark times.