

IT IS A RETURN TO THE BEGINNING. IT IS THE SAME STORY AND I AM ASKED AGAIN TO TALK ABOUT WAR AND WOMEN.

- Nadine Saliba, International Woman's Day

It was four years ago that I spoke at the International Women's Day Rally and I spoke specifically about war and women. I spoke about the chaos and violence unleashed upon the women of Iraq and Palestine. I pleaded for awareness of the suffering visited upon the women in these countries and for a moment of solidarity, no for a lifetime of solidarity with them, that I hoped an International Woman's Day would inspire in us.

Four years ago, I described the impact of war and occupation on the lives of Iraqi and Palestinian women as their role oscillates between victim and resistor. I reminded my audience that women are not just passive victims of conflict, even if their contribution to their national resistance movements and to the survival of their families and communities remains insufficiently catalogued.

With war comes the collapse of state institutions and services and people who don't lose their lives, lose their economic stability and access to resources. Today, five million Iraqis are refugees. Refugee women develop survival strategies but at what cost? When their money runs out and employment is impossible to come by, they turn to selling their assets. First they sell their gold and then they sell their bodies. That could be an asset too and women are a resourceful species. Girls who fled Iraq, as little as 11, 12 and 13, have turned to prostitution to support their families.

Four years ago, I asked: what is our responsibility, as citizens of a democracy, in the wars and policies of our elected politicians and what is our responsibility towards those on the receiving end of these wars? Iraq has been destroyed, the land of Gilgamesh and Enkidu, home of Dijla and Furat. The Tigris and the Euphrates rivers-the blood veins of the world's oldest civilization-today they flood with the blood of Iraqis.

It is a return to the beginning. It is the same story and I am asked again to talk about war and women. To be honest..., I don't want to repeat myself. I am unwilling to find new words to repackage traditional discourses at well-intentioned rallies for progressive causes.

I am still revolted by the atrocities that take place on a daily basis, but it is hard to keep up. Gaza distracts me from Baghdad and I feel guilty for ignoring my Iraqi dead. I still flare up in a rage every now and then, whenever I can work up my senses from the deluge of carnage that, on a good day, we serve as impotent witnesses to if not collaborators in the execution, unwilling executioners perhaps, but executioners none the less.

I have no illusions about the role we can play as citizens and activists residing in the west. We will continue to demonstrate and rally and speak up because we cannot allow history to record that colonial and genocidal policies went on without protest and agitation by free people and people of conscience.

But I am done beseeching western audiences to give a damn. I feel ashamed and ungrateful to say these words before the organizers of this event, some of the most honorable, committed and courageous people I've met. They are a people for whom activism is not a weekend hobby, who don't undulate from one

rally to another, who don't wait from one war to another to spasm into activism. They don't wait to be asked to do their good deed for the season like me. They live it. So forgive my insolence but you want to know about the impact of war on women?

Have you seen a mother wail for her dead child? Have you seen the women of Gaza form a human chain stretching from the north to the south of the strip to protest the Israeli siege of their lives and the starvation of their families with the complicity of the International community and Arab regimes? Have you seen the children of Gaza, those still living, carried around in coffins anticipating their own death?

The truth lies naked in the infernos of Palestine and Iraq, but in the noise of your corporate media and on the cadaver of your newspaper, you prefer it with clothes on.

On International Women's day, I should tell you about the impact of war on the lives of women. But I don't know where to begin. I suppose I can begin by telling you the number of Iraqi women who have died in this war. That should be a simple enough task. Unfortunately, I can't even do that because Iraqi deaths apparently pose a statistical predicament and we can't accurately account for them. Do you find it strange that we don't even have a consensus on the number of Iraqis who have perished in this war? We know the number of dollars spent on the Iraq war and we know the number of dead American soldiers but we don't know the number of dead Iraqis.

In past wars, we rejected references to victims as numbers. We said, with righteous indignation, numbers are dehumanizing, we demanded instead to know the names of victims and to learn their stories. We wanted to put a human face on each victim. Today, we are begging just to know the number of Iraqis that have died; they can otherwise remain nameless and faceless. Imagine that, we are shamelessly begging for the numbers. We'll even promise not to be indignant, we say, just give us an accurate number. Is it 80 thousand or is it a million? I need to know whether to mourn 80 thousand times or a million times over.

Alas, the U.S. government insists that it doesn't keep track of civilian deaths. General Tommy Franks poetically said: "We don't do body counts." You can't beat those moments of honesty. It's a metaphor for where we are as a country and as a species.

So no, I can't give you the number of Iraqi women who have died in this American war because nobody really knows, it is a statistical mystery. With all our scientific advances and yet we stand, mouths gaping, before the enigma of our Iraqi victims, unable to count. Let's visit the graveyards for they are plentiful, let's open up the graves and let's count. One, (pointing to myself) two, three, etc... (pointing at random members of the audience.)

Bio: Born and raised in Lebanon, Nadine immigrated to San Antonio in 1993 attending UTSA and The University of Massachusetts at Amherst. She is a small business owner and a member of the Conjunto de Nepantleras at the Esperanza Center.



Rudy Rosales talks to Nadine Saliba at the IWD Rally. Photo: Graciela Sanchez.