

Speech by Samah Salame at the Conference

Women, Peace and Security: A Local, Regional and International Perspective

Wahat al-Salam – Neve Shalom, October 17, 2016

Hello and welcome to Wahat al-Salam – Neve Shalom. For forty years, this hilltop has heard the footsteps of young Palestinian and Israeli, Arab and Jewish children running happily to school, and we haven't been able to tell if their laughter is Arab or Jewish. This tent has seen hundreds of assemblies and discussions, moments of terrible pain over the premature loss of friends, as well as joyful weddings of children who were born and raised here, and who decided to continue their lives here.

A warm greeting from our village to everyone who is here today. As chairperson of our educational association, on behalf of all our members, and of myself, I want to welcome especially our guest **Leymah Gbowee**. I thank *Women Wage Peace* for your initiative in choosing our community as the venue for this meeting. You inspire us with hope.

I still remember the day when I received a phone call from Michal Barak and Hamutal Guri – they wanted to drag me to the founding meeting of *Women Wage Peace*. In that meeting we were only two Arab women in a room packed with Jewish women, and they were all saying the same thing: “We can no longer bear this war. We are tired of blood being spilled and we need get up and make peace - nothing more, nothing less. Peace, the sweet success that nobody talks about. I remember asking myself, “What are they dreaming of? How much naivety can be contained in one room in Tel Aviv?

My answer was a lot! Lots of dreams and a tremendous quantity of naivety. And who knows more than I do that Feminist Palestinians in Israel can never forsake either of these tools. In fact, this is true for women anywhere. A woman needs to believe wholeheartedly in *something* in order to bring up children, build a home and protect her family. She needs to dream and hold on to the belief that all of this is possible.

I remember the activities we planned at that first meeting. We talked about boarding trains to the south. Hamutal joked that if there's one woman who could board a non-existent train from the non-existent station in Umm al-Fahm, it would be Samah! Everyone laughed, and the train that is *Women Wage Peace* began its journey. I told them then that peace is nowhere in sight, but that I'm here because of the word “waging”. It is only by acting that we can move something. I'm sick of talk, as much as of silence and non-action.

Dear friends, I am sure that sitting in the audience here are some whose political views I cannot bear. For sure there are people who want a Jewish state, a Palestinian state; one state or two, “one homeland – two states” and others. But I'm just as certain that there is no woman or man here who thinks that our situation today is just fine. There is no mother who isn't scared that one day her son or daughter might go out and get hurt. Hostility, hatred and racism are rising up all around. Every one of us is sure that we and our children deserve a better place to live, a place where Palestinian is seen as equal to Jew, a place that sanctifies human beings rather than land, a place where brotherhood and justice prevail, where both peoples can live in dignity and peace. We women do not have children to spare for unnecessary wars. We have no room in our hearts for fear, and we have seen enough blood. For too many years we have let men run "the situation", allowed them to fight, to kill and bury children, both mentally and physically under the burden of pain and tears. For years and years we stood aside because we were occupied with essence and meaning, with life itself. As someone once said, “Look at what men have accomplished in this area for seventy years ? Look how we women remained silent and cooperated, leaving everything, *everything* in the hands of power hungry men who fought to control capital and rule over one another. And we played into the hands of whoever was most violent, committed more murders or gained more powerful weapons. Whatever the score, every woman – Arab or Jew – knows that death always tastes the same. No military funeral or funeral of a martyr can comfort a grieving mother or an orphaned child. And yet we continued to keep silent and believe that peace will come, someday.

Women Wage Peace and the village of Neve Shalom - Wahat al Salam are in some way similar, though one is a movement and the other is a place; one is made up of women scattered all over and the other consists of families who have built a small place for their dream. We are alike in that we share the same basic belief that peace is possible: it is something that can be achieved. It's sometimes very hard. Sometimes you have to talk with the other; you are angry, argue and shout, but you never, never give up. I don't mean over principles or land and territory: You never give up on human beings – on those who live in this place and plan to go on living here.

Women wage peace, I wish you a great Hebrew and Hijri new year. I wish all of us Palestinians and Israelis, Arabs and Jews simply to be successful with our goal and make peace. Thank you.

Samah spoke as the Chairperson of the Association of Friends of the Wahat al-Salam – Neve Shalom Educational Institutions