



11 Mar 2009

## Interview with Zainab Salbi, Founder and CEO of Women for Women International

Kristin Ivie



Photo by Women for Women

In celebration of Women's History Month, I wanted to highlight one of my favorite women's organizations – Women for Women International. Zainab Salbi was kind enough to share her thoughts on the organization's history, what's in store for their future, and their success in moving 125,000 individual donors to contribute some \$61 million to help over 153,000 women across the globe!

Zainab started Women for Women in 1993 to aid female survivors of war as they restore stability and gain self-sufficiency. Having seen her mother and other women work to support and sustain their families during the Iran-Iraq war, and having survived trials of her own, Zainab says she is a firm believer in the resilience of

women and their ability to rebuild.

Currently operating in nine war-torn countries, Women for Women employs a unique model of addressing the needs of female survivors of war in a holistic way through a year-long hands-on program. The organization focuses on helping women gain access to economic resources and political and social power to produce lasting change - not only for themselves, but also for their daughters and granddaughters – and refuses to perpetuate women's victimhood. The sharing of stories from these survivors has inspired average women all around to contribute what they can to empower another woman through sponsorship. Zainab puts it best when she says:

*...Women for Women International has been a bridge in connecting women to each other, in showing a simple and clear way where every woman can be a philanthropist, where every woman can be an agent of change, where every woman can be a diplomat as she reaches a woman in another part of the world, and where every woman can take ownership of her voice and her resources in bringing peace and stability to this world.*

Read the full interview below and learn more about Women for Women International at [www.womenforwomen.org](http://www.womenforwomen.org).

## Questions:

**Kristin:** You have an incredible story of rising from adversity to reinvent yourself as a social entrepreneur and activist. How did your experience shape the program you built at Women for Women?

**Zainab:** From the very beginning, Women for Women International's program has been built on the foundation of listening to the very women we are trying to help. So, more than anything else, I give the women credit for speaking out about their needs. As for how my personal experience helped to shape Women for Women International's programming model, I think there were some formative moments that really shaped the way that I saw the world, and ultimately helped to crystallize my dedication to helping women survivors of war become agents of the change they wish to see for their families and communities.

Growing up in war, I witnessed how war was discussed in the news and how it was limited to what I call the "front-line" discussion, focusing exclusively on militarized strategies and solutions. I began to see the discrepancy between the front-line discussion and what I came to call the "back-line" discussion, where women are taking the lead by keeping life going, keeping the schools open, the meals on the table, etc. This back-line is where my mother would sing songs and put on puppet shows so that we children didn't hear the explosions outside; it is where she and the other women in my family would tell us stories—even if they were made up—of what life was like in Iraq when they were children so that we would know about a life outside of war. Understanding this reality, and the lengths to which my mother and other women went to preserve some degree of normalcy for the children, helped me to a great extent as the vision of Women for Women International's program was taking shape and remains a key theme in our programming today.

Something else that I try to always keep in my mind is that even though I grew up in a home where I had everything I wanted, including an endless supply of love and support from my family and friends, this all disappeared in what seemed like an instant and beyond all my control. At the age of 21, after fleeing what turned out to be an abusive marriage that my mother had arranged to protect me from increasing danger in Iraq, I found myself stranded in the United States during the first Iraq war, nowhere near my family and friends, with very little money and no other support. I didn't have anything but I was still able to build a life for myself, bit by bit. I know that this resilience is in every one of us and in every woman I know. I know that life may give us many things at times and may take from us many things at other times. The question that we each have, that I had, is not what I have or don't have but how I deal with it, the spirit that I carry myself with, and the belief that I can rebuild.

The fact that I was able to rebuild my life from zero so soon after I migrated to the US, and then to start an organization that has helped more than 153,000 women and distributed more than 61 million dollars to women survivors of wars, makes me a believer in people's ability to rebuild, and in the ability to see the beauty and make a difference in this world despite all the wars and all the horrible things humans do to each other and their surroundings. I count my blessings every day for I am deeply grateful to have made the journey that I have and to realize that misfortunes often bring us much fortunes.

**Kristin: When did you first realize that you wanted to spend your life empowering women survivors of war to rebuild?**

**Zainab:** I grew up with my mother's stories about the injustice women face around the world, how their voices are silenced, the abuse they face, and how a woman should always make sure that she is economically independent and never to tolerate any physical or verbal abuse from anybody.

The combination of knowing what women go through and how I need to be a strong woman made me decide at an early age, somewhere around 15, that I should focus my life on working with women. Now the years passed by and I went through other routes. Little did I know that the stories my mother told me about women facing violence and injustice would happen to me as well through an abusive marriage. When I got out of that marriage, and rebuilt my life as I document it in my memoir *Between Two Worlds*, I learned about the rape camps in Bosnia and Herzegovina. That was a turning point for me and it was when I realized I must focus my life on helping women around the world in rebuilding their lives. At that time, I was with my former husband and best friend who was the one person that believed in the importance for each one of us to act upon their dreams and that is when my journey started.

**Kristin: How is Women for Women International's approach to supporting women unique?**

**Zainab:** There are two primary ways in which Women for Women International's program is unique: 1) We do not perpetuate women's victim hood; and 2) Women for Women International's model works in a comprehensive, linear way to produce measurable outcomes.

Women for Women International's overarching goal is to help women move from victims to survivors to active citizens. This is not a program that perpetuates the victim hood of women. Our program helps give women survivors of wars the tools to stand on their feet, which reinforces their energy and desire to rebuild their lives, families and communities. Its simplicity, clarity, and ability to address different aspects of women's lives in tangible, measurable ways tangible deliveries are the keys to its success.

Each woman who enrolls in Women for Women International's yearlong program receives direct financial aid and emotional support, rights awareness education, market-based vocational skills training and income generation assistance. By including emergency assistance for necessities, helping her rebuild her support network, educating her about her rights, and teaching her a vocational skill based on the demands of the local market to help her earn an income, this comprehensive model balances between meeting women's short term financial and emotional needs with long term solutions in every woman's life.

The Sponsorship Program, where we ask every person to sponsor a woman survivor of war by sending her \$27 a month, along with a letter to start communication link between the two women is what provides the basic financial and emotional support for the sponsored woman. Upon enrollment, women form groups of 20, which becomes their women's circle which helps them to rebuild their support networks. The rights awareness and vocational skills tracks training that they access through our centers helps equip them with

needed economic, social and political tools to rebuild their lives. Finally, the focus on their employment and leadership upon their graduation helps provide tangible economic opportunities that contribute to long-term stability for themselves, their families and communities. This ripple effect is why we believe that stronger women help to build stronger nations.

**Kristin:** You have been able to mobilize more than 125,000 people in 105 countries to contribute what they could to support women survivors of war. What has made you so successful in being able to motivate so many individuals to give? What are the most important lessons and best practices you might share?

**Zainab:** I believe that every woman has a story. The extremity of our stories may be different, but there should never be a value judgment of what story is more powerful than another. As woman we each have a story that relates to our womanhood and that we often keep to ourselves. Sometimes this story becomes too much for us remain silent. For some women who have lost everything, this story is all they have and they must tell it out loud to prove, first to themselves, and then to others that they are still alive. For example, Honorata, who graduated from our program and now works with us as a trainer helping other women, is one example of a woman who escaped sexual slavery in Congo, and as part of her healing she decided that her responsibility is not only to survive but to also tell her story to everyone around her so that other women would not go through what they have gone through.

Hearing the truth when it is told is what I believe resonated with the more than 125,000 people that have joined our global community of support through Women for Women International's Sponsorship Program. The truth always penetrates through our hearts and that is what leads us to action. Once we are led to action we become part of the solution.

In the early days of Women for Women International there were many blessings that came our way and made our growth and ability to mobilize women from so many parts of the world possible. For example, being featured seven times on the Oprah Winfrey Show definitely helped a lot. However, even with all of the blessings, the key to our success has been that Women for Women International has been a bridge in connecting women to each other, in showing a simple and clear way where every woman can be a philanthropist, where every woman can be an agent of change, where every woman can be a diplomat as she reaches a woman in another part of the world, and where every woman can take ownership of her voice and her resources in bringing peace and stability to this world.

**Kristin:** You have already helped more than 153,000 women in war-torn countries. How will investing in these women change the future of societies like Afghanistan, Bosnia, Rwanda, and Sudan? And what is the future for Women for Women?

**Zainab:** At the core of most wars is conflict over economic resources and political voice. To pursue change, women have focused mostly on demanding the right for political representation. These political



demands have been met in many parts of the world but they have not necessarily led to a significant change in the conditions of women's lives. In addition, efforts to improve women's economic circumstances without attending social and political decision power have also failed to create significant change in women's lives. Women for Women International recognizes that lasting change can be achieved only through the combination of these two elements.

As part of the organization's 10-year strategic plan, Women for Women International will help create economic and social power for a critical mass of socially excluded women in each country where the organization operates, enabling women to negotiate lasting and permanent change in their lives and communities. In addition to mobilizing women in more stable societies to help amplify the voices of the women in the program as they articulate their needs, priorities and recommendations, the organization's programs will be designed with the following guiding principles:

- **Social Power:** To give women the tools so that they can articulate their needs and develop social networks that provide security and safety, as well as forming a force for actions which will change their decision making power at the community and societal level.
- **Political Power:** To mobilize the organization's leadership at the local, national, and global levels with the objective of disseminating the voices of the women the organization serves, articulating the obstacles women face, and influencing policy change accordingly.
- **Economic Power:** To fully employ the majority of the program graduates such that there is a meaningful impact on key sectors of the economy with management and ownership in the hands of women when possible. The goal is for women to control critical elements within key industries.

Economic self-sufficiency is a critical pre-condition for women to take their rightful place in the lives of their families and their communities. In the countries where Women for Women International works, the process of identifying economic opportunity for women often necessarily turns to agriculture—a trade that can be profitable and is largely socially acceptable for women. However, female farmers are often subsistence farmers with little knowledge of how to increase their production capacity or market their crops.

Women for Women International recognizes that these women need a profitable alternative to subsistence agriculture if they are to feed their families and rebuild their communities. As such, they need scalable, commercial market opportunities and technical assistance that will guide them on cutting-edge farming and marketing techniques. After much research, on-the-ground assessment and local buy-in, Women for Women International has launched a program that aims to provide profitable opportunities for women in agriculture that will not only help them to feed their families but also to increase their household levels of income and nutritional variety. This is our answer to the global food crisis, and to endemic poverty: the Commercial Integrated Farming Initiative, or CIFI.

CIFI will provide 3,000 women over three years with training in how to use sustainable farming practices to grow crops that can both be sold for profit in the local market and feed their families. So far we have been able to secure funding to pilot CIFI in both Rwanda and Sudan, where the earth is already being tilled. The next country in which we hope to launch a comparable program will be Afghanistan. With insecurity and

some of the harshest winters in recent history, this is a country that desperately needs food relief and income generation opportunities to break the cycle of hunger and poverty that threatens peace and stability for generations to come.