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A Meridians Report on MADRE: The War on Iraq

Elizabeth Hanssen

Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism, Volume 4, Number 1,
2003, pp. 132-141 (Article)

Published by Duke University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mer.2004.0010>



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A Meridians Report on MADRE

The War on Iraq

On 8 March 2003, Amrita Basu, director of the five-college Women's Research Center in South Hadley, Massachusetts, USA, chose to celebrate International Women's Day by inviting the organization MADRE to present at Mount Holyoke College. MADRE is an international women's rights organization that works in partnership with women's community-based groups in conflict areas worldwide. MADRE was formed in 1983, initially in response to the U.S.-sponsored contra war in Nicaragua. At this time, a group of women activists, poets, teachers, artists, and health professionals traveled to Nicaragua to witness the impact of the U.S.-sponsored contra war and were horrified by what they saw. They returned to the United States with a mandate from the women of Nicaragua—to bring the stories of the Nicaraguan women and children to the attention of the U.S. public and mobilize people to demand a change in U.S. government policy. In the 1990s, the group took up a range of human rights issues in other regions, particularly regions that had suffered from the effects of repressive policies instituted by the United States government. To date, MADRE has raised over \$20 million dollars in humanitarian aid for the groups with which the organization works. In her introduction to Vivian Stromberg, director of MADRE, and Dr. Fathieh Saudi, a Jordanian pediatrician and longtime women's human rights advocate, Professor Basu described MADRE as “exemplifying some of the greatest achievements of women's rights and human rights organizations internationally.”

The following is a report of the presentation conducted by MADRE at Mt. Holyoke, complimented with additional research compiled by the Meridians staff, and written by managing editor Elizabeth Hanssen.

Conference Report

The timing for MADRE's presentation at Mt. Holyoke was especially prescient, taking place as U.S. troops, under the leadership of President George Bush, were already ensconced in Afghanistan, and preparing to

[Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism 2003, vol. 4, no. 1, pp. 132–141]
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enter Iraq under the guise of “The War on Terror.” The focus of the ensuing discussion largely addressed the situation in Iraq, both in terms of the first Gulf War and the impending actions taken in the spring of 2003.

In her introduction to the presentation, Professor Basu credited MADRE with being a product of the global women’s movement and a global movement around international human rights while at the same time responding to critics concerned with some of the weaknesses and problems associated both with the human rights movement and with the women’s movement. Basu noted that MADRE is to be commended for not confining itself to simply documenting infractions on human rights but to also working actively to protest them; the organization is also to be commended for working not to privilege women’s and civil and political rights over their economic and social rights. Basu added that MADRE has been as involved in fighting for indigenous rights, labor rights, and economic justice as in fighting for women’s human rights. Many activists in the United States view MADRE as an ideal example of human rights activism in countries that have been adversely affected by U.S. foreign policy. Professor Basu concluded that one of the most impressive aspects of MADRE is the extent to which it has formed links with local level community organizations. Its conception of a global women’s movement does not come from the top down but from the bottom up.

The Speakers

Dr. Fathieh Saudi is a Jordanian pediatrician who works alongside Ms. Stromberg as a human rights activist with a particular interest in the impact of violence on women and children. She worked at the Nazareth Pediatric Center in Beirut, Lebanon, after the Israel engagement until 1982, which served both Lebanese and Palestinian refugees. She has also worked extensively with several non-governmental and international health organizations, in the field of health care programs and services, as well as in training, management, and educational programs. Since 1991, she has been associated with MADRE, working on various issues pertaining especially to the Gulf War and now in the broader context of the Middle East. Saudi is also the author of several books on children’s health and development as well as author of *Days of Ashes*, *Memories* in Arabic, and *The Health and Social Situation of Palestinians in Lebanon*.

Dr. Vivian Stromberg, the Executive Director and a founding member of MADRE, is responsible for MADRE's program development, public and international relations, training programs, and organizational and staff development. Stromberg's areas of expertise include economic development, U.S. foreign policy, health care, popular education, sexual violence, human rights, and child development. As MADRE representative to the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations, Stromberg has traveled widely, speaking on a broad range of subjects at international conferences. She has received a number of awards in recognition for her work, including awards from the New York City Council Women of Achievement and the Committee for a Democratic Palestine.

Stromberg came to MADRE in 1990 after a long career as a music teacher in the South Bronx, an underserved neighborhood in New York City. At that time, Stromberg recalled, support for the Gulf War was building momentum and much of the neighborhood she lived in was affected in some way by the mobilization. In such a climate, it was difficult to carry on business as usual, including in the classroom; thus, Stromberg decided to introduce discussion of the war into her classroom. At the end of one class, she asked the students whether or not they thought there was a group of children their age in Iraq having the same kind of discussion with their teacher. Stromberg remembers clearly this pivotal moment in her career: a student raised his hand and said, "Ms. Stromberg, there are no children in Iraq." For Stromberg, this response was both shocking and illuminating, clearly illustrating how wars like the impending one could come to pass so easily: the administration had successfully taken away the humanity of the other. The next day, Stromberg retired from teaching and assumed the directorship of MADRE.

MADRE's History

Stromberg provided a history of the organization's founding and development in order to provide a context for their current work. MADRE began in 1983 with a lawsuit brought against the State Department for violations of international law by Nicaraguan plaintiffs who had been victims of the Contra War. The transcripts read during this case were very moving and prompted a number of those involved to try and educate the people of the United States about what the U.S. government was doing and how U.S.

policies in Latin America impact the people of that region. In order to achieve this end, they decided to present dramatic readings of the transcripts with artists such as Susan Sarandon lending their talent and names to the effort.

Stromberg added that when the group then traveled to Nicaragua that summer and listened to Nicaraguan women's groups tell their stories, the MADRE group asked what it was that the Nicaraguan women thought could be done in the United States to help, and consistently every group answered, "go back to the United States, organize women, and if women are organized, they will be strong enough to stop Reagan and please be a voice for us."

The then loosely formed group took that advice very seriously. At the time, they were a founding board of about a dozen women of different races and ages from different sectors of the peace and justice and human rights struggles, but all had been working all of their adult lives for peace and for justice. All were also experiencing incredible frustration at the lack of peace, justice, and human rights—or progress toward those ends. According to Stromberg, they decided to create an organization that would be based on the following principles:

- a women's organization, which is to say, led by women, but that would embrace the participation of women and men.
- an organization that would address the impact of U.S. foreign policy on other regions of the world.
- an organization that would accomplish a combination of political work that would address the systems that allow the injustices and the abuses of human rights to take place AND humanitarian work that would address the immediate needs of women on a community level so that in fact they could participate in addressing those injustices.

The group attempted to locate a similar organization whose infrastructure they could duplicate but since they could not locate others that were built on these principles, they decided to invent it on their own. MADRE was born in 1983.

Stromberg described the ways in which MADRE has grown since that time to work in partnership with women's community-based groups in conflict areas worldwide. Work that began in Nicaragua soon extended to El Salvador and beyond. As of 2003, MADRE has been active in Nicaragua, Guatemala, Chiapas, Mexico, Cuba, Haiti, Rwanda, Kenya, the former

Yugoslavia, Palestine, Iraq, Colombia, and Peru. Its programs address issues of sustainable development, community improvement, and women's health; violence and war; discrimination and racism; self-determination and collective rights; women's leadership development and human rights education.

MADRE's Work

Stromberg recounted one of her earlier projects, the Mother Courage Peace Tour of 1992 that brought women from every Gulf country in which troops were stationed, including Iraq, Israel, and Palestinian, to tour the United States. These women were joined by mothers who had either a daughter or a son deployed in the Gulf with help from an organization then called Military Families Support network. Together the group tried to address the issues of wars.

It was the first time an encounter of this kind had taken place. MADRE had been warned that they should not do a campaign about Iraq—that people would think that the organization favored Saddam Hussein, especially those people who were accustomed to MADRE's work in Central America. However, Stromberg remembered, the opposite was true: the more the group was told not to proceed, the more determined they became. It became clear by the overwhelming number of notes and letters and phone calls received from people around the United States showing that the support and the need for these kinds of encounters existed: "I thought I was the only one; my whole block was wrapped up in a yellow ribbon. I was afraid to say anything. I wanted to do something but I didn't know what and I didn't know how and you gave me a voice." Stromberg emphasized that making a space for people to have a voice was one of the most important things the group achieved.

Another project MADRE conceived was called the Milk and Medicine Campaign, carried out in cooperation with the General Federation of Jordanian women. In addition to raising a substantial amount of money, the group brought supplies to Iraq in a convoy of trucks driven by women from Jordan. Stromberg told the story of how, during the bombardment, dozens of doctors and truck drivers had died trying to take supplies to the besieged city of Baghdad, and a year later, MADRE traveled the same roads, also taking supplies to Baghdad, arriving in Iraq on the first anniversary of

the Gulf War bombardment. The organization delivered over ten tons of milk and medicine to children in two Iraqi hospitals and called for the lifting of sanctions that had caused the death of nearly one million children. MADRE produced a video of that trip (shown during speaking engagements such as this one), which brings home to viewers the harsh realities of Iraqi life under the sanctions.

Stromberg pointed out that, prior to the last Gulf War, Iraq was a country where there was full access to universal health care, food was subsidized, everyone had the opportunity to go to school, and there was transportation and communication available to everyone. At the same time, however, democracy was not a way of life, people had to comply with the regime or they were dealt with severely. Stromberg explained that Iraqis, like people everywhere, craved democracy and how the democratic opposition to Saddam Hussein was undermined by U.S.-led sanctions. With the Gulf War and the imposition of sanctions, people's quest for democratic access has been trumped by their need for food and medicine. Stromberg stated, "If your baby might not make it until tomorrow, you really don't give a damn about democratic access. You need to have milk for that baby, you need to have medicine for that baby."

In regard to the current aggressions in Iraq, Stromberg stressed the need for being vocal and strategic, noting, "This war will have an impact everywhere across the globe—on women in Latin America, on women in Africa, not only on women in Iraq and the Middle East. Anywhere protests can be mounted is important, from the most local to the international."

Life in Iraq under the Sanctions

Dr. Saudi described her own lifetime in the Middle East under the almost constant state of war starting in 1948 to the present, and pointed out that most of the people who live in the Middle East have not chosen this way of life. Saudi thinks that misconceptions about people living in the region lead those outside the area to falsely believe that all Middle Eastern countries are well-equipped and prepared to fight. She pointed out that having lived in Jordan as a woman, she has never been trained to fight, and neither has most of the population; in fact, most of the population in many countries in the Middle East are underdeveloped civil societies living under Third World conditions with severely limited resources insufficient to meet

the basic needs of the people, with limited access to education, and with limited participation in the armed conflict.

Saudi described Iraqi life under the sanctions and discussed the impact of those sanctions—that the only money coming into Iraq was from the sale of their petroleum through the Oil for Food program, which allows each Iraqi to have the minimum of basic food like rice, wheat, and sugar each month—and that without this there would be famine. Such imposed sanctions are a real humiliation to the population, turning them into refugees in their own countries—even though that nation could be one of the richest in the world. There is, at the moment, a great deal of malnutrition in Iraq. Saudi commented, “Their money is worth almost nothing—one Iraqi pound was worth the equivalent of \$3 and now \$1 is the equivalent of 2,000–3,000 Iraqi pounds. The country has fallen to levels lower than that of many third world countries. There are no books, no paper in the schools, no medicine—even basics like eggs are very expensive. Families can’t buy shoes or clothing for their children.”

Saudi described how residents of the area began to suffer under such conditions as early as the beginning of 1991: by selling off “their art work, their windows, their tables . . . the wheels of their cars—and now, there is nothing much left to sell, and with the sanctions, none of these things can be bought in Iraq.” In addition, electricity is limited in most places, ranging from eight to nineteen hours a day, and drinking water is hard to come by because it is not possible to find all the chemicals needed for its processing. Saudi noted, “People are living with just the bare minimum; it is like they have been thrown back to the Middle Ages.” The sanctions did not weaken the wholly unpopular Iraqi regime—the sanctions’ intended target—however, it did create widespread suffering among the population.

This impending war appears unjustified to Saudi. The justifications that the American administration has presented, in Saudi’s opinion, seem to be pretenses and not necessarily a reflection of fact. While Saudi surmised that although it is not clear what is really driving the aggression, it appears most likely to be related to oil: until now, 25 percent of the oil used in America comes from Iraqi petrol. Iraq has about 20 percent of the world reserve petrol, which is a tremendous national wealth that should be at the service of the people. The administration’s claims of searching out weapons of mass destruction also does not appear to be based on fact,

since it is Dr. Saudi's impression that weapons of mass destruction were most likely destroyed in Iraq ten years ago. Saudi likened the past twelve years of living under the sanctions for the Iraqi people as the equivalent of mass destruction, "a mass destruction for the people to live twelve years already under the horrible conditions of sanctions. And now they face another bombardment. They are completely afraid—of bombs, of planes—of having to suffer again." It is for this reason that Dr. Saudi has joined in this action now—to fight against a war that works against basic human rights and will cause suffering not only among the Iraqis, she fears, but will serve to further weaken the rights of the population for the entire region.

Saudi's particular focus on women and children sharpens her awareness of how war impacts this population differently than, for example, the population as a whole. She commented, "War makes the situation for women more difficult because women are always at the center of any emergency taking place, and too often this kind of situation promotes a lot of extremism, like religious extremism, and then attention is diverted from women's struggles—the fight for the rights of women to be in the government, the rights of women to fully participate in the democratic government, and the right to build the civil society." Saudi reflected that "women are probably more courageous in times of war; they can raise their voices more and demand to stop the wars, in their own countries and abroad." Saudi was encouraged to see a lot of demonstrations taking place in many countries of the region against the war. She concludes, "Ideally, this energy could be directed to implementing a democracy."

Saudi discussed the contradictions that exist in U.S. policy towards weapons of mass destruction, pointing out that "there are countries that possess nuclear weapons or mass destruction weapons. For example, the United Kingdom has 100 nuclear weapons, and in Israel, there are biological, chemical weapons"—yet, they are not topics of discussion or debate. Saudi added that it is "as if there are peaceful nuclear weapons and others that are not peaceful." Her response to this debate is simple—take away all of the mass destruction weapons, pressure the U.S. government to find a peaceful solution to the difficulties of the entire region, not just Iraq.

In an interview subsequent to the presentation,¹ Saudi elaborated on her role as pediatrician, which affords her an alarming view of the long-term implications of the U.S.-led sanctions for the future of the Iraqi nation as a

whole, but for women and children especially, noting that it is well documented by UNICEF that children are the main losers from the sanctions, and that the overall mortality has increased three times since the war began, going from 47 to 136 per thousand children. Unfortunately, the present condition of Iraqi children will impact them far into the future. She explains how 30 percent of children are born with low birth weight due to the chronic malnutrition of their mothers, and that these children will remain more fragile and likely to suffer from any other diseases all their lives. During childhood the majority of these children, at least five million, suffer from malnutrition due to the food provided by the oil-for-food program, which provides no meat, fruits or vegetables. States Saudi: "Growth and development will be permanently damaged for these children." Saudi emphasizes that women, as mothers, face a great deal of pressure looking out for the survival, protection, and education of their children. However, under present conditions, they feel left alone "to grieve not only the poverty but also the loss of their children in front of their eyes without having any means to stop all their suffering." Saudi adds, "The psychological traumatism exemplified with fears, nightmares, insecurity, are just banal even to mention."

Saudi is adamant that the only real way to alleviate such suffering is to end all wars. The basic injustices that exist throughout the world could be better addressed, according to Saudi, without inflicting suffering on civilians. She adds that the anti-human aspect of war "is not in keeping with any tolerable form of communication. People have language to communicate. Language is so precious and special to all people in the world. . . ." And since, at the end of wars, "people have to sit down and talk . . . it is better to go to that place directly, where decision-makers talk without having populations pay the price beforehand."

Conclusions/Questions

Questions from the audience, among others, addressed the global impact of the current "Operation" in Iraq, as well as why MADRE had chosen a human rights approach over a women's rights or humanitarian approach. Stromberg's response to these questions made it clear that this seemingly localized action will have widespread, global influence, and will severely impact the basic human rights of people around the world, especially poor

people, as freedoms are curtailed and the economic imbalances between the rich and the poor increase. One example offered by Stromberg comes from Central America, where, after September 11, 2001, all of the presidents of the five countries in the region made a decree that the bank accounts of Arabs in Central America be frozen. The population of Arab descent in Central America is largely a wealthy population, owning businesses and factories, employing many local people; in addition to having their assets seized, those they employed lost their livelihood.

Not only are women typically absent from the formulation of such policy decisions as those made by the Central American Council, but too often they bear the brunt; in this case, more women and children will go hungry, live under substandard conditions, and lack adequate medical care. MADRE's decision to become a women's human rights organization therefore was a strategic one, filling an important but neglected niche. As Dr. Saudi pointed out earlier, when war occurs women are often at the center of the conflict, and yet, when there is conflict, the ongoing struggle for women's rights and participation in the decision-making processes are typically overshadowed. Stromberg reiterated that women hold particular perspectives, and that these perspectives are not only important, but should be central to all dialogue on these issues. Thus, MADRE's work strives to close critical gaps as a woman's human rights organization. It not only addresses the rights of women, but also brings women's perspectives to bear on the human rights dialogue.

NOTE

Interview conducted via e-mail by Dr. Myriam J.A. Chancy, April 2003.