

# Interview

## Leading Change



Zainab Salbi

**An Interview with Zainab Salbi,  
Founder and Chief Executive Officer, Women for Women International**

**EDITORS' NOTE** Zainab Salbi is the author of two books: a national bestseller *Between Two Worlds: Escape from Tyranny: Growing Up in the Shadow of Saddam* and *The Other Side of War: Women's Stories of Survival and Hope*. She was honored by Former President Bill Clinton for her work in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1993 and was most recently nominated by Former President Clinton as one of the Harper's Bazaar 21st Century Heroines. She is the recipient of the 2010 David Rockefeller Bridging Leadership Award and was named one of 22 members of the Clinton Global Initiative Lead program. In 2011, Salbi was named one of the Top 100 Women: Activists and Campaigners by the Guardian and was highlighted as a Female Faith Heroine by The Tony Blair Faith Foundation. Salbi is a World Economic Forum Young Global Leader and a member of the UN Secretary General's Civil Society Advisory Group focusing on the UN Security Council Resolution 1325. She has a master's degree from the London School of Economics and Political Science and a bachelor's degree from George Mason University.

**ORGANIZATION BRIEF** Since 1993, Women for Women International ([www.womenforwomen.org](http://www.womenforwomen.org)) has helped 300,000 women survivors of wars access social and economic opportunities through a program of rights awareness training, vocational skills education, and access to income generating opportunities. In its 18-year history, the organization has distributed more than \$95 million in direct aid and micro credit loans, and has impacted more than 1.6 million family members. Women for Women International was awarded the 2006 Conrad N. Hilton Humanitarian Prize, becoming the first women's organization to receive this honor.

**What prompted you to form Women for Women International?**

I was 23 at the time and had just arrived in America. I came from Iraq where I grew up

in war and very close to a dictator. My days were spent going to a normal school, where my classmates talked about public executions, and their fathers and brothers being killed. In the afternoons, I would go home to an upper middle class family, but I knew that we were all going to go in the evening or on the weekend to see Saddam Hussein and that I could not speak about the injustice I saw or heard about in my day school.

When I moved to America, two things happened: I learned about the Holocaust for the first time in my life – they didn't teach us about that in Iraq; and I learned about the rape and concentration camps in Bosnia.

Starting out, I had no money, but I had no fear. I felt like I needed to act and that is how it started.

**In the early days, how challenging was it?**

It's still challenging, although it's growing fast. I had my own assumptions of how to help and the only thing I could give myself credit for was being open, and listening to other people's views.

The first trip I took was to Croatia with my former husband and the co-founder of Women for Women to see how we could help women survivors of rape. The women of Croatia were clear that we either had to help all women survivors of the war or none of them, but we couldn't line up a group of women who were rape victims, because we would stigmatize them by singling them out.

I learned that we define rape victims as the most vulnerable ones, but in truth, it's an emotional trauma. Who are we to say that only the raped women are victims?

In the middle of the program, I was helping a Bosnian woman create a business plan for a chicken farm. I asked, "How many eggs does a chicken give a day?" Here I am with my master's degree and I didn't know something so basic. But it's not a matter of not saving face – it's about merging the knowledge. She knew how many eggs and I knew how to drive the business plan.

That openness helped me and the organization move from helping 33 women to 300,000 and has helped us grow from a budget of nothing to a \$35 million budget.

**Are you operating all over the world?**

We are operating in the worst parts of the world: Congo, Rwanda, Salam Sudan, Nigeria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Bosnia/Kosovo.

The focus for Women for Women is conflict and post-conflict areas, and societies that have collapsed for a variety of reasons, mostly from war.

The collapse is not only of the infrastructure, but of the social network. People in war stop having trust in each other, because it's sometimes your neighbor who commits the crime.

We've been asked why we need to go to the toughest places on earth. To paraphrase a Bosnian journalist, war is a flashlight on humanity; it shows you the best of humanity, and the worst as well. War is a microcosm of normal life – just more intense.

So it would be easier to focus on poverty and not focus on the trauma and collapse of war, but I don't want to shy away from addressing these tough issues in very difficult places.

It takes an active agent to turn on that flashlight of the goodness of humanity and that is up to each of us.

**How tough is it emotionally to run this organization and is it challenging to put metrics in place so you can see the impact it has created?**

The most active entrepreneurs are the victims of wars because they are so eager to rebuild



their lives. While they appreciate the food and secondhand clothing distribution, they are eager to get back on their feet.

We do a one-year training program for traumatized women giving them emotional as well as financial support. Each woman is grouped with 25 others in a classroom. She comes to our program every other week where we teach her about nutrition, health, voting, and going to school – about the rights and services she has access to combined with basic numeracy and literacy, and health issues. I call this, access to knowledge.

But she must have her own income at the end. So we combined that with access to resources. We do market assessment to determine what the local population spends their money on. It's mostly food and reconstruction, and some service industries. But sometimes, there is an international market that is interested in it for a variety of reasons. Kate Spade, for instance, has outsourced to women in Bosnia, Rwanda, and Afghanistan for years.

Our goal is teaching women skills that meet market demands. Eighty percent of the farmers in the world are women and they produce 60 percent of the food, but earn only 10 percent of the income and own less than 2 percent of the land.

We teach skills that allow a woman to earn a solid income. As a result of these two programs, a woman enters the program earning on average 55 cents per day and within one year of exiting the program, she is earning \$1.22 per day.

We have moved from just telling the stories of these women to saying that what we need is to encourage people to invest in these women and not simply give charity to them, for practical reasons. According to the World Bank, women reinvest 90 percent of their income in their families compared to men who reinvest 30 to 40 percent.

So if you want to increase childhood education, nutrition, food production, or health and HIV prevention, invest in women.

We need to place her into economic opportunities. Some of them involve micro-credit and in Afghanistan, we have deals with factory owners to employ the women we have there.

For some of them, we lease land from governments and get commercial buyers to buy the produce women raise there. We help the women form co-ops, make sure they're producing commercially, and connect them with commercial buyers. These women are making up to \$200 per month in countries like Sudan or Rwanda.

So it's a small, but measurable, shift in attitude. I can't tell you how many of these women now run for local election and have changed their nutritional, income, and behavioral practices.

### **You have a men's leadership program. How important was it to reach out to the male community?**

It's very important. If we just work with women and ignore men, whatever progress happens on one end can be defeated on the other end.

Also, men in these contexts have lived in a black hole. No one has ever talked to them about women's rights.

So we designed Leadership Training for Men, which targets the respected figures in the community. We provide them with a training program in which we say, if you want to be a good leader, you need to understand what 55 percent of your population is saying. The training is in their self-interest because it's based on good leadership, which listens to its population and what the people want.

One of our trainees said he never respected women until he realized they have economic power and he then wished to partner with his wife rather than be separated from her. These men became our allies – they talk

six times more likely to be infected than boys of the same age.

Whatever crisis we are dealing with in the world, women are the majority of it – 80 percent of the refugees in the world are women and children. So in order to deal with the crisis, we have no choice but to bring women into the discussion.

We need to engage them economically and politically, as well as at the decision-making table.

Women for Women International asks every woman or man around the world to sponsor one woman at a time by sending her \$30/month along with pictures and letters exchanged for one year to go through the program. That letter and picture is our own formal public diplomacy. This tells the women recipient, someone cares about you, and most of the times it's an American, which is worth billions of dollars in PR efforts. I can't tell you how many women named their daughters after the American woman who sponsored them.

Also, while Angelina Jolie and Ashley Judd are sponsors, every woman can be a philanthropist. You do not have to be wealthy.

### **Have you been happy with the support you've gotten?**

Getting resources is always the challenge, but 55 percent of our supporters give us less than \$1,000 a month.

Eight percent of all philanthropic contributions go to the issues of women and only 2 cents out of every development aid dollar goes to girls, according to the Nike Foundation.

So we are very blessed to get a lot of support, but in the scope of what we are operating, we still need more.

### **Could you have imagined this would have evolved into what it has become?**

I just wanted to serve.

I didn't have the ambition of creating a \$35-million organization with 750 staff from 10 countries and one of the leading women's organizations in America. I almost think if that was the plan, we might never have achieved it.

But what touches me the most is not how big or how popular we are. I met a woman in Afghanistan who came to our program, learned embroidery and tailoring, and took a line from another group and built a small business on the side. She has \$30,000 in her bank account, a store in Kabul that sells embroidery, and she employs 150 women.

Through Women for Women, we gave her the breathing room to emerge in her strength. At the end of the day, that is how I measure my personal success and gratification. ●



to other husbands and take the pressure off us and the wives.

We're only sharing knowledge and helping them in their public positions, but the ultimate change comes from within so they have ownership of it.

### **You have talked a lot about galvanizing a global women's movement. What does that look like?**

Women are still underpaid, still underrepresented politically and in boardrooms, and in terms of decision-making, you also still see a gap.

I don't believe if women take over the world, it will be a better place. But I do believe that if we partner, we will all be in a better place.

Two-thirds of the most impoverished and illiterate people in the world are women; women are 50 percent of HIV/AIDS positive people – girls between the age of 15 and 24 are

*A young Zainab Salbi with former family acquaintance Saddam Hussein (opposite page) and recording the stories of women in Iraq (above)*