

Muslim-Jewish Women's Leadership Initiative: A Case Study of Grassroots Peacebuilding

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Resolving cultural and political conflicts, building peace around the world, and reorienting our societies towards harmony and justice are goals that scholars and practitioners across many fields seek to attain. When faced with challenges such as these, education serves as a promising tool for helping the next generation of global citizens and leaders to develop skills in peaceful cross-cultural communication, peacebuilding, and conflict resolution.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been going on for over seventy years, making it one of the longest unresolved conflicts internationally. While a lot of efforts have been exerted to resolve this complex conflict, most of them were top-down initiatives at the official level. However, there is certainly a need for more bottom-up participation at the grassroots level to help resolve this conflict. This study is an attempt to fill this gap in the existing peacebuilding literature, in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Our paper presents a case study of a Jewish-Muslim dialogue program called the "Women's Leadership Initiative" (WLI). The program brought together Jewish and Muslim undergraduate and graduate women students at the University of Maryland to explore the possibility for peace in the midst of the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and to collaboratively explore the possibility for mutual understanding and inter-cultural cooperation with the "Other."

The paper describes the processes, challenges, and outcomes of the WLI, and shares useful insights for future intergroup dialogue facilitators, practitioners, and participants.

Specifically, the paper discusses (a) the difficulty and importance of learning about, and accepting, multiple perspectives; (b) the participants' desire to focus on religious beliefs as a unifying factor, and the implications of doing so; and (c) the participant-led initiatives that resulted from the semester-long program.

Situated in the context of U.S. higher education, the processes and outcomes of the WLI point to several interesting implications for those engaged in peacebuilding and conflict resolution, both within and beyond the field of education. Using qualitative research methods and analyses, this paper describes the WLI, discusses the theoretical foundations of this type of pedagogical approach, and explores both the difficulties and the successes of the program with regard to its goals of fostering intercultural communication and collaborative action to serve the purpose of peacebuilding.

In light of the historical and ongoing reality of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, pedagogical approaches to Jewish-Muslim dialogue are particularly important. Moreover, given that women are often underrepresented in peacebuilding processes and conflict resolution efforts, we acknowledge the need for greater empirical and practice-based attention to women's potential as

leaders in the worldwide peace movement, in general, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in particular.

Additionally, the role of youth has been equally underrepresented in the realm of peacebuilding and conflict resolution, generally, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is no exception. Our study contributes to filling this gap through focusing on a valuable group to target in peace education initiatives, namely young, college-aged, women students, as they expand their horizons through higher education, acquiring all the needed skills to become future leaders in the worldwide peace movement.

It is for these reasons that this case study focuses specifically on young Jewish and Muslim women in higher education, and considers the numerous ways in which they may be uniquely qualified to contribute to global discussions on peace and conflict resolution, moving forward.

We believe that paying attention to these two largely overlooked dimensions, and demographic categories, of gender and generation in previous peacebuilding and conflict resolution literature, generally, and the literature tackling the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, particularly, is certainly one of the most significant contributions of the WLI and this research study, which tackles it.

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