

From Page 1

## Interview with Jennifer Fasulo

*Nadia Mahmood: Why SOWFI? Why have you established the Solidarity with Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq? What attracted your attention to this issue? When was SOWFI established and where?*

**Jennifer Fasulo:** I learned about OWFI through reading one of Yanar Mohammed's speeches on the internet. I put together a flyer and started handing it out at various anti-war and feminist events in New York. There was always a great deal of interest and positive reaction. Then I formed a working committee that helped bring Yanar to speak in NYC. Her talk was an important catalyst for SOWFI because she made a deep impression on many women who heard her that night. The seeds of SOWFI began with a conversation between myself and Fran Luck, a feminist radio producer, who had done an in-depth interview with Yanar. This was in February of 2003. We had learned about the passage of Resolution 137 and the spontaneous revolts against it by Iraqi women. We wanted to bring attention to these protests, demonstrate against the US government's role in turning back women's rights and show our solidarity with Iraqi women's struggle for equality. Fran sent out an email call to others who might be interested in planning an action, and four women showed up to the first meeting. That number then grew to 8. The demonstration was a powerful example of fusing anti-war activism with an out-front women's rights agenda—We had a very diverse and informed group of speakers including several Iraqi and Iranian activists. We felt very energized by the demo which we felt broke new ground and decided we wanted to keep working together as a group. SOWFI is unique in that we are a diverse group of women in terms of race, culture and age. Some members are new to politics, while others have roots that go back to the early US women's liberation

movement. Unfortunately, we just lost one of our members, Corrine who was a feminist foremother. She passed away last month from heart failure. She was 77, but you would have never known it from her level of activity. We carry on inspired by her example of lifelong activism.

*NM: Organisation of Women's Freedom in Iraq has generated a long debate about its stand towards full rights and full equality for women, for a secular state and secular constitution, for opposing political Islam, have you faced any obstacles in your solidarity work with OWFI?*

**JF:** Yes, we have. Part of the reason SOWFI came into existence is because we realized that the existing anti-war groups, were not taking up the cause of Iraqi women's rights. As usual, the left relegates this issue to the bottom of their priority list. We learned through the great work that OWFI was doing, that Iraqi women were fighting two battles: one against the US occupiers and one against the Islamic clerics and militias who wanted to talibanize Iraqi society. The left was reluctant to acknowledge this for a lot of reasons—one being that they believe Islamists like al-Sadr, who are ostensibly fighting against US imperialism, should be supported. They choose to ignore the fact that these groups are violently attacking and subjugating women—and that if they gain power, Iraqi women will share a fate of complete rightlessness similar to that of women in Afghanistan and Iran.

After our demonstration, though we got some favorable media coverage from the local community radio, we were also attacked by Muslim guests on a popular morning program from the same station. They likened our demonstration to a racist demonization of Muslim people and then spent the rest of the program defending the "sacredness of Shar'ia." We wrote a complaint letter (which can be read on OWFI's website) and now

have a letter writing campaign going to the program to give us equal time to respond; and to challenge this sexist and reactionary stance, which unfortunately is nothing new on the left. We want to thank OWFI for the two great letters they wrote to the station. Other readers can write letters too, by going to OWFI's website and reading our original complaint letter—as well as cutting and pasting the sample support letter.

*NM: What are the main issues that you find need to be explained for your public in the US? Any particular questions?*

**JF:** There is a lot that needs to be explained to American progressives. The activist community in the US is not educated about the Middle East in the same way as they are around say Central America. Its very important for Americans to learn more about the history of the Middle East and the secular socialist struggles—particularly the hard lessons learned by Iranian leftists, but also Iraq's radical communist history, and the mass movements of women and workers which dominated Iraqi society only 40, 50 years ago. They need to understand more about Saddam Hussein's connection to the CIA and how he was used by the US to attack the communist movement. It's only with this knowledge and perspective that we can understand the events unfolding in Iraq today.

Americans need to realize that not everyone in the so-called Islamic world is Muslim or even religious. These kinds of racist stereotypes are constantly reinforced by bad Hollywood movies and the mainstream media—which represent all Arabs as religious fanatics and make no distinction between oppressive Islamic regimes or movements and the people being terrorized by them. These myths totally hide the plurality of Middle Eastern societies where there are progressive and reactionary forces just like everywhere else in the world.

*Continues on Page 6*

From page 5

### Interview with Jennifer fasulo

Of course, another obstacle is just the sexism which pervades the US left—in some ways they just don't care what happens to women; it's secondary or not even on the map. This is a long historical problem; it's nothing new.



When you look at to the horrors being perpetrated against women by the Taliban, it's at least equal in scale to the crimes of apartheid in South Africa—but you don't hear the same international condemnation. It's only crimes against women that get defended as "culture."

**NM:** *The struggle of women in Iraq has attracted many decent people's attention and support in the US, Europe and across the globe, from your experience, what you want to share with other co-activists to strengthening women rights issue in Iraq and the Middle East?*

**JF:** We have found a positive response from ordinary people—especially women who identify with the struggle of Iraqi women out of their own experience of oppression. For example, we received a letter recently from a woman who identified herself as a rape

victim and was very upset by the reports of rapes in the Iraqi prisons. She wanted to find out what she could do to help. We get lots of emails like these. Also, when Yanar was having trouble raising money to open the shelter in Baghdad, I sent out an urgent email call for donations. I was amazed when responses came in from all over the

country— people who didn't even know me, but were willing to send checks in the mail. We were able to raise the full amount Yanar needed in just one week's time. Then when Yanar returned to NY just recently, there were two young women from Georgia who drove all the way to NYC (18 hours!) just to see her presentation. So the work of OWFI clearly hits a strong chord with many people, just as it did with me. There are also feminist organizations like MADRE and V-Day which have been very supportive and various segments of the left: usually those who are not part of the biggest established anti-war groups—anarchists and those critical of traditional left politics. In a way, the issue of Iraqi women's rights has been a galvanizing issue for bringing together a variety of activists who are frustrated with the left as well as strong feminists who are not afraid to challenge notions of cultural relativism, and take a stand for women's universal rights.

**NM:** *Can you tell our readers what is on your agenda to support women in Iraq, or if you have any on your agenda for women's struggle in the Middle East?*

**JF:** We just finished a mass flyering of the Republican National Convention which took place in NYC at the end of August. There were half a million people demonstrating against the RNC and it was a good opportunity to spread the word about OWFI. We are also in the process of setting up a website for SOWFI so that we can increase our visibility and facilitate all the interest and inquiries we get from all around the world. We have launched a fundraising drive through the email because we know how much OWFI is in need of resources. I should also mention that there are a number of other people around the country planning fundraisers or writing articles, who are not members of SOWFI per se, but who have responded to our outreach efforts and want to build support for the Iraqi women's movement and the secular socialist forces in Iraq. We also are working on developing a comprehensive media list and strengthening our connection to various media outlets. And finally, we maintain an email list-serve where we send out reports that we get from OWFI and try to keep people informed about the amazing work you are doing.

**NM:** *Any messages you want to send?*  
I just want to say thank you for all your courageous and inspirational work. The example of OWFI brings me hope about the current dreadful state of our world. Your radical uncompromising stand on behalf of women's rights and freedom is also a rejuvenating force for our women's movement at home. It is a great honor and privilege to be working in solidarity with you.

Solidarity with Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq  
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