

The 2010 Right Livelihood Awards

Speech by

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Dear Mr. Speaker and members of Parliament, dear fellow Laureates of the Right Livelihood Award, Excellencies, dear Friends,

In January 1988, less than a month after the outbreak of the first *INTIFADA* – the Palestinian uprising against Israeli Occupation – I gathered together a group of eleven Israeli physicians and we went to visit *Al-Shifa* hospital in Gaza.

That visit was a shaking event. We witnessed first-hand the results of the Israeli reaction to the civil uprising: gun-wounds, people who had been clubbed about the head to the point of unconsciousness, youngsters with broken hands and feet, and more. Shocking too was the state of the medical facilities, especially when we considered the cutting-edge technological standards we were accustomed to in our hospitals inside Israel. *Al-Shifa* Hospital was a government institution, which meant it was under the supervision and responsibility of the Israeli occupying authorities. Why then – we asked ourselves – was it not of a similar standard to our own? Why were the Palestinian doctors subordinate to a military regime, constantly threatened on political grounds?

More than two decades have passed. From a pioneer organization that introduced the concept of human rights to the Israeli public, we have evolved into a leading human rights organization. Founded by a woman, and led by women, we established a model of feminist grass-roots social leadership, one that was quickly emulated by others. Within a year or two following the founding of PHR Israel, new NGOs led by women were established, making it clear that feminist activism had widened its scope from struggling strictly for women's rights to a new capacity in which the whole world was theirs to change.

PHR Israel is now a somewhat older, more established organization, but our commitment to our values has not faltered. We are as resolute in our action and advocacy for ending the occupation, in our struggle for the right to health of Palestinians living under occupation,

and of all prisoners and detainees. At the same time we also widened our activities to protect and promote the right to health of the marginalized communities within Israel: migrant workers, asylum seekers, residents of the unrecognized Bedouin villages, the poor and those citizens of Israel who suffer discrimination. PHR Israel works in the “back yards” of Israeli society, back yards that many don’t want to see, and don’t care about.

Indeed, in Israel today, the discourse of human rights is commonplace. Yet the respect for human rights is not! Recently there is growing denunciation of members of our Human Rights community as traitors. Our demand for true equality and our alternative world view to the militaristic approach in education and policy making are the main cause for that denunciation. The attack is multi-layered; it comes via legislation, the media, right wing academics and NGOs.

It is a moment of test; it is a moment where a human rights organization under threat should make its stand even clearer and more vocal than before. Physicians for Human Rights Israel - I am sure - will rise to this task, because for us, the moral and legal traditions of human rights, ideas of social justice, and the principles of medical ethics are combined with a feminist worldview of partnership and solidarity.

My way as a woman activist started long before I established PHR Israel, long before I knew what radical feminism was, or had had the chance to read some theoretical thinking. I struggled as a female soldier in a male-dominated militaristic society, later against the discrimination of female students in the medical school where we were asked to be grateful for the 10% quota allocated to female students. All these experiences and others served to train me for a life of activism and enabled me to found PHR Israel and to give it this inherent belief that working for human rights must be done with and not just for the community.

We are part of the community; we are citizens just as we are physicians, thus our obligation to social justice and human rights. We raise our voice with the voiceless: the tortured victims, prisoners, and all the disempowered people and groups in our society.

We struggle against wrongs that stem from human conduct, rather than the illnesses caused by viruses or microbes. We invest in advocating for changing the system or policy that

causes the suffering we encounter every day in our clinics and interventions. Our radical political work has influenced various aspects of the Israeli health system and we played a vital role in the Israeli high court ruling against torture. Yet much is still to be done.

Solidarity is our guiding principle in our work with Palestinians and with other disempowered and excluded communities. We try our best to avoid patronization and reject the philanthropic approach. While engaged in direct medical actions for individuals in our mobile and open clinics, or while advocating for individuals whose rights are violated, we learn of the causes of those people's lack of access to adequate health care, and commit ourselves to finding a radical solution to the problem and demand accountability from those in power.

We are constantly fostering critical thinking that empowers us against the temptation of the "bear hug" of the mainstream. Because, let me assure you, many wish to silence us by diverting us to charity or to humanitarian work which carries no political message. We do know that there is no Humanitarian solution to humanitarian crises. We know that a Humanitarian crisis is an outcome of political cause and bad will. Hunger, even if caused by a natural disaster, can be better resolved by a just political action. In our region – the disaster is man-made.

For all of us, in PHR Israel in particular and for the human rights community in Israel in general, the award comes at a perfect time. It empowers our friends, volunteers and members – without them our work would not have been possible – in one of the most challenging times in Israeli society. We live in a society that chooses to live a life of deception: believing that Israelis are the only victims; that the long occupation is necessary for security; that we are a true democracy with no racism or xenophobia, no apartheid regime. Voices like ours are attacked so as to silence us. Your supporting voice might have an essential influence on public opinion and policy makers in Israel.

For all of us, this award gives a moment of pride and recognition to lives of continuous struggle that is often rebuked, lonely and rejected. It is not an easy decision for a physician or nurse to join PHR Israel. They are criticized by their peers for being "political", as if medicine can be a neutral profession. Because health is used by the regime as a means of

controlling its citizens, of undocumented people and Palestinians under occupation, it is through the right to health that we can best struggle against such control and oppression.

Today, when different NGOs are being delegitimized, especially those advocating human rights for Palestinians under occupation, or striving to achieve a more inclusive society, doctors might be hesitant to join us. The State becomes more and more ethnocentric, and democratic values are compromised. Society becomes less and less tolerant as it marks Israeli Palestinian citizens as "fifth columnists"; asylum seekers as a danger to the Jewish character of the State; Anti-Occupation activists and the Human Rights groups as a threat to the existence of the State, as if the only way to maintain Israel is via military control, oppression and humiliation of the other. The result of this well-coordinated attack is a restriction of the discourse – of the public debate that is so essential to any democratic process. At this point in time the award not only gives recognition to past achievements, but plays a significant role in supporting our present struggle.

I feel honored to stand here today, in the company of the other laureates. Being acknowledged as having similar resilience and achievements to theirs is the best reward I could have hoped for. Being one of you is extremely important since I myself, and PHR-Israel, are in great need of moral support and recognition.

I humbly accept this award in the name of Physicians for Human Rights' wonderful and relentless staff, board, volunteers, and membership; in the name of our dear Palestinian partners from the occupied Palestinian territory; and in the name of all who support us. From Israel and from the Occupied Palestinian Territory I bring you back their gratitude, and their commitment to building societies that we will not be ashamed of, but rather proud of for their conduct towards human rights.

Let us join voices and be heard loud and clear. For Silence is the language of complicity, but speaking out is the language of change.

Thank you very much.