Kayan–Feminist Organization: Sustainable Grassroots Community Activism

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T his article describes the process by which Kayan (Being) created the model for the Women's Leadership Development and Sustainable Community Activism Program. The organizational model presented here was developed as a result of activities that began in 1998, during which Kayan worked with approximately 180 Arab women's groups, with over 3,000 women from around fifty villages and towns across Israel. The model changed and solidified, through repeated evaluations and testing of the program's goals in general, and through the program's ongoing feedback specifically with groups of women involved. Evaluations were gathered from women participating in the groups and also through evaluations of its activities conducted by Kayan.

The program model changed in light of these findings, with progressively deeper understanding about the continuity required when working with leadership development projects with communities of women and sustainable community activism. The result, as will be seen in the following pages, has become the anchor regarding the needs of women and their communities, and of the vision of the Kayan feminist organization.

Who are We?

Near the end of 1997, a group of young Arab feminist women who were active in women's organizations in Haifa began to discuss the possibilities of establishing an Arab feminist organization for social change. The feminist vision that slowly emerged from the many ideological discussions was that of a society that is equal, just, and secure, free of violence and racism, coercion or discrimination, and one that would secure for its citizens — women and men — the freedom to choose one's own lifestyle, actualize each one's potential, and express oneself without either social or institutional obstacles. The result of these meetings was the establishment, in

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1998, of the organization Kayan–Feminist Organization for social change and for the promotion of the status of Arab women in Israel.

Community Activism: Crucial Conditions for Social Change

During the beginning ideological discussions surrounding the establishment of the organization, it was clear to the founding members that direct activism with women in their communities was vital for social change. In order to be directly active in the field, Kayan created a program for individual empowerment and consciousness-raising that was long-term (meeting weekly for three to six months). This program was implemented with groups of ten to fifteen women within various Arab villages and towns, and in ethnically mixed cities. Such activism with groups, as opposed to individuals, was a strategy specifically chosen as more appropriate for the goals of Kayan as an organization for social change, as opposed to the strategies of other service organizations that address the needs of the individual. Group work also facilitated, as much as possible, the crucial dialog among a large community of women. Programs were based on the concept that group activities created greater space for interpersonal support among the women themselves, and more empowerment of the group within the larger society.

The organization instituted the goal of actively creating empowerment groups in fifteen to twenty communities a year. Therefore, the members of Kayan made contact with community professionals, men and women, such as social workers, local welfare professionals, and community organizers. These people initially mediated contacts between Kayan and the women of various communities.

A modest fee was asked of each participating women, and at times membership was provided free of charge. This low price allowed Kayan's workers to market their programs more aggressively to the public and professional bodies through which the organization was reaching out to various communities. At times, the community workers themselves initiated contact with Kayan. Such long-term direct action with hundreds of women in geographically far-flung, outlying communities propelled Kayan to the forefront of the field of Arab women's community organizing. As a result, the organization succeeded in building a network of contacts with hundreds of women within their home communities, which in turn ultimately became a precious organizational resource for widespread grassroots social change.

Work Model of Women's Groups, Initial Phase

The programs offered by Kayan were provided by a facilitator who accompanied the group throughout the entire process. Group meetings consisted of guided discussions concerning subjects of direct interest to women's daily lives, specifically examining

the connections between their personal issues and their social status as women within their communities, and opportunities for social change. Most of the participants in the empowerment groups were mothers who did not work outside of the home, were of the middle to lower ten percent of household income levels, and who had no more than elementary education. A minority of participants had completed high school.

The participants were unfamiliar with the format of group discussions, and some expressed grave doubts about the need to share their personal thoughts and experiences with others. They were fearful that they would suffer personal repercussions from having their thoughts and opinions open to others, or from the social ramifications of unpopular or socially unacceptable opinions. (This is not uncommon among traditional Arab women, who rarely publicly share personal thoughts and opinions.) Indeed, some participants dropped out of the group after the initial meetings for these reasons. But most of the women discovered that they were keenly interested in the group process and in the challenging questions raised in their discussions.

Kayan's role ended with the completion of the series of meetings, which lasted approximately three months. Kayan's goal of creating such group discussions among Arab women in their communities had been realized, and, usually for the first time in the women's lives, questions about their individual empowerment as well as their status in their communities, had been raised.

Evaluation and Reorganization, I

At the end of this period, each group's activities and process were evaluated. These evaluations concentrated on two main factors: the participants' feedback and the status of the organization in terms of goals realized; that is, numbers of individual participants and numbers of communities/villages where Kayan had been active. Concerning the latter, Kayan succeeded in reaching its goal. But the participants' feedback made clear that they were not satisfied with just the process of personal empowerment; indeed they saw the implementation of community activism as a necessary act, as a motivator for social change. Even so, women reported their frustration as a result of having taken part in the groups. In their opinion, as they became more aware of their status and position in society, they realized their complete lack of tools to change their situation and to improve their lives.

As a result of such feedback, Kayan began to offer additional programming, in the form of workshops aimed toward community organizing that provided tools and skills in the establishment and development of community projects. These programs became an integral part of Kayan's work with women's groups. At this point, Kayan's model of working with groups of women consisted of accompanying groups in their process of planning and implementing community entrepreneurships, in addition to facilitating groups of personal empowerment within various communities.

The results were impressive. A women's community center was established — the first and only of its kind in the village of Arabeh, which offered local women various enrichment classes, ranging from basic literacy, language skills, and computer skills, along with lectures and discussions about women's status. Another group succeeded in launching a public transportation system into Maghar, a town of 20,000 that suffered from a lack of transportation (and for which women were the primary users, as the overwhelming majority had neither driver's licenses nor access to cars). This achievement brought the women public recognition and respect as a body able to meet the needs of women in the community, and was a catalyst for raising public consciousness as to their potential power and influence over their daily, and public, lives. As before, Kayan's role ended with the completion of the community project. Organizational resources were turned toward new groups and projects.

Evaluation and Reorganization, II: The Element of Long-term Sustainability

An evaluation was undertaken based on the examination of women's groups' capabilities to initiate projects and implement changes within communities, or to integrate social-change processes/community activism. Viewed thus, most groups showed that they were able to achieve their stated goals.

Moreover, the element of sustaining long-term activity was not evaluated in the review process at the end of each project. Initial, basic evaluations were carried out by Kayan's staff midway through 2006 and showed that most of the groups ceased their activities when Kayan ended its hands-on guidance of the groups. When questions were raised pertaining to the cessation of activities, women responded that the lack of support, both on-site and from the wider community, made it impossible to continue to fund their community activities, along with their lack of knowledge and tools for community activism, feelings of isolation, and unfamiliarity with the skills needed for group leadership.

During the Second Lebanon War of 2006, all community activism stopped completely. For the duration of the conflict, Kayan's staff began asking specific questions about the women who had participated in its groups: how were they faring, how were they dealing with the emergency situation, were they receiving any particular aid, and what were their needs in a wartime situation? The most common answer was that they needed support from others, they needed to communicate with others. The question of whether the women who had participated together in an empowerment group continued to support and communicate with each other during the war was answered in the negative; outside of chance meetings, the fact was that the women themselves had gone into "emergency mode," and regressed from any public roles into traditional roles. The disappearance of any continuity of

the community of women during times of crisis or emergency strengthened Kayan's resolve to concentrate its resources on community activism to create structures whose goal was to preserve and ensure women's sustained activism even when Kayan itself was not directly involved.

Project Model of Work with Women's Groups after Two Evaluation Processes — Leadership Groups

The working model was developed as a result of two rounds of program evaluations on a number of levels, plus many long discussions, incorporating the experiences described above. Six months after the cessation of the Second Lebanon War, the following three obstacles to sustainable local community activism were identified, and became the basis for the new approach:

- The lack of support for local women leaders, both within the larger community and from representatives from public bodies

- Restricted access to knowledge resources

- Lack of financial resources.

The women of Kayan decided to reduce the amount of the organization's resources devoted to opening new groups, and to concentrate attention and resources on developing groups of local leaders, and to respond to their difficulties. This was in opposition to the beginning working model, which was based on creating women's groups in many different communities. Kayan began working directly with a smaller number of women from a variety of locales who gathered together for a program of specialized leadership training. Participating women were meticulously identified and tapped to take part in this next stage of programming, with the view that sustainable community activism is conditional on a continuity of functioning local leadership. The role of the organization now became that of training and preparing women in the tools and skills of community activism and organization, in addition to aiding and supporting their transformation into community leaders.

The makeup of the groups had an influence on how the participants viewed themselves in leadership roles. In the previous working model, the participants were made up of women from the same communities; that is, women with similar local identities who were distinguishable from each other by their different levels of personal motivation and commitment to social change. These gaps of motivation between women weakened the commitment of emerging leaders, who found themselves isolated among their neighbors due to their higher level of interest in community involvement. In contrast, the leadership groups were more homogeneous in the participants' level of commitment to social change, and created bonds between the women despite differences in their local identities. These women stood out from

the others due to their ability and commitment to taking the reins towards social change within their communities and in the importance each attached to improving the status of women in general and in their home communities in particular. The gathering together of these women greatly strengthened them in their leadership roles and deepened their understanding of what these roles would demand of them.

The New Work Model: Jusur

These leadership training groups constitute the platform for the new working model that has been named Jusur (Bridges). The model works through three central directions dedicated to sustaining local women's activism by addressing the following obstacles:

Support and Empowerment of Local Community Leaders. According to the participants' feedback, the lack of local support, on-site and from a distance, caused obstacles to continued activism, such as isolation and frustration. The women were accused of neglecting their duties at home and to their families as a result of their public activism. Their isolation is worsened by feelings of guilt, making it very difficult for them to continue their activist work in a consistent manner, and in most instances their work stops completely.

The creation of a supportive space for women leaders is crucial for sustainable activism.

The new model is focused on a local leadership framework drawn from various villages or towns, in addition to Kayan's guidance. The goal is to assist women in planning and implementing various activist projects. This framework constitutes an opportunity for women leaders from tens of communities to meet and interact as partners with the will and commitment to bring about social change. The goal of such a platform is to allow these women to support and draw strength from each other, as they together examine the obstacles and challenges that confront them all as agents of social change. The meetings are known as The Jusur Forum, which meets four times a year. Members of the Forum testify to the feelings of relief from the personal isolation that has become part and parcel of their activism, and the strong connections that have resulted from belonging to a broader framework that has created a common bond among them.

Provision of Knowledge Resources. Currently available frameworks deal with promoting advanced capacity-building and training, which serve the needs of a different type of activism. This refers to "formal" activism within centralized institutions with a wide resource base. These frameworks are not accessible to local activists for a number of reasons. The most central of these is the geographic distance between these institutions and the women of Kayan's constituency. There is also the fact that the services provided by the larger institutions do not meet the women "where they are," and often are not targeted to the needs of this population.

Therefore, the advanced training programs in community organization are inaccessible, unavailable, and inappropriate for the community of women with whom Kayan works. This situation is a set-up for failure in terms of sustainable local activism, in that such activism demands advanced skills and tools that are unknown to the women. Kayan's ideological basis focuses the organization toward the empowerment of women who make up the disadvantaged sectors of Israeli society, and who are limited in their access to resources. These women for the most part are outside the scope of public circles of influence. The new model places Kayan as the organization that fills the vacuum created by the gap between women in grassroots communities and the knowledge and resources they need to be effective leaders, through the Jusur Forum program. The program provides women with opportunities to receive advanced training in many areas of community organizing, which helps them continue their work and improve their effectiveness in leadership roles. Among the subjects covered in the training, for example, are issues of managing a budget, working with the media, appearing in the media, short- and long-term planning skills, and more.

Financial Aid. The vast majority who work with Kayan are not employed outside the home. It clearly follows that they are not economically independent. In that their activism takes place in frameworks that they themselves create, or within those completely without financial support, these women are themselves the only source of any monies to finance their activities. This in turn causes many women to stop their projects, or to deplete their own meager resources to fund their work. Any outside funding is usually given to groups with solidly based organizational structure and proven track records. But the activism that Kayan has obligated itself to promote does not necessarily meet these requirements, and therefore is left out of the traditional funding circles. Due to the lack of traditional funding resources, Kayan founded a small fund whose goal is to support projects through modest grants of up to $1,500 to each community.

The creation of this circle of support, the access to knowledge, and the source of modest financial resources allow participating activists of the Jusur Forum to bring together women from within their communities, to pass on the knowledge and skills they have acquired from the Forum and the programs offered by Kayan, so that together they can advance broad processes of local change and activism. These groups constitute the main source of a support base for the women leaders themselves.

Leadership and Sustainable Community Activism: The Next Steps

The responsibility for broadening the base for community activism rests with the leaders themselves. Leaders do, indeed, go out into the field and enroll women to become members of active groups, train them, and together they start on their way to social change. These groups succeed in reaching hundreds in their communities, and by so doing expand the

sphere of connections and influence. During the last two years, this model has succeeded in preserving the cohesiveness of activist community groups and their activities within local communities; to promote local change, and to initiate connections between the groups and public bodies to facilitate cooperation among them.

The continuous existence of the group in and of itself affords it public recognition, from the women of the community and also from representatives of the public institutions around them. The participants of the Forum's enrichment programs and financial support allowed the leaders to achieve independence and the ability to plan actions for the future, and by so doing, increased their ability to preserve sustainability of the women's community's initiatives.

The goals that we have for the near future are the expansion of the Jusur Forum, with the objective of widening the circles of influence for the long term. This is a new model for us, and we are working to develop it even as we implement it. We especially wish to focus on two main challenges:

Sustainability in times of emergency or crisis (war, local conflicts, or natural disasters):

The regression that began with public roles for women in times of crisis in favor of traditional roles, as was seen during the Second Lebanon War, does essential damage to the ability and potential power of women to act within the community. Women's activism, which had proven its worth and effectiveness under normal circumstances, suddenly has no relevance in times of crisis. The struggle to secure basic needs such as safety for oneself and one's family leaves behind a very small place for women's public involvement. They must withdraw into the family sphere, and therefore find it nearly impossible to exercise their leadership precisely when it is most sorely needed. Before us, then, is the challenge of translating women's activist and leadership skills for use during crises, and to create groups of skilled, proactive leaders who will actualize their leadership abilities.

Establishment of a Grassroots Women's Network

Two years after the realization of the Jusur project, we are investigating the option of establishing a Women's Network, so that it will be possible to leverage cooperation across communities, not only for mutual support, but also for joint community activities in general. We would like to enable the fledging projects in individual places to meet the challenge of institutionalizing under an umbrella of grassroots activism, wherein local leaders would be able to embrace the big picture, not only based on the interests of their local communities, but of all Arab women.

Translated from the Hebrew by Batya Salzman