

My name is Shireen Awwad. It's an honor to be with you in South Africa to learn more about your people and struggle for justice.

I was born and raised in Beit Sahour, which is known as the Shepherd's Field from the time of Jesus up to this day. I have four lovely children. Meroun, Marcel, Mae and Rayan. My parents were also born and raised in Palestine. My dad is from Beit Sahour and my mom comes from Gaza. Both of them are my source of inspiration.

Some people ask: How long have you been involved in peace building? My answer is that there is no beginning or end. I've been involved in peacebuilding for as long as I can remember.

The thing that first challenged me to be active in peacebuilding is conflict. I have been surrounded by conflict all of my life. We all live in some sort of conflict, but the conflict I learned is a double edged sword, as one side is gender and how my culture perceives it and the other is the political situation we are living in.

**I am a woman, I am a Christian, and I am a peacemaker, and I will share how each of these affect me and many Palestinian Christian women in the context of the conflict.**

Over the years, I have challenged my Palestinian community to think deeply about this with me, and I invite you to consider what areas you, as fellow Christian practitioners in social justice need to challenge your own community. Palestine and South Africa have faced long periods of injustice, and both our peoples know that the international community plays a role in this, in solidarity advocating for justice, in silence -- complicit in it, or actively siding with those who oppress us.

**[WOMAN -- WHAT PALESTINIAN SOCIETY SAYS ABOUT WOMEN]**

I am a woman, but this does not simply refer to my biological sex. It refers to the roles and expectations surrounding Palestinian womanhood. It's important to begin by distinguishing between sex and gender. **Gender** is not biological sex, whether one is born male or female, but it is the roles and responsibilities associated with masculinity and femininity. Gender characteristics change over time as it has to do with the cultural way a body is perceived.

In my society, and perhaps in yours, gender has many negative connotations because there is a difference between what men and women can do. Most times the culture with its politics, traditions, church and society limit women in so many ways. We often hear: "Women are not ready to hold a proper conversation," or "When men speak women should be silent." We know how much men depend on

women, but when it is in public, it is not the case. “Women should be behind the scenes,” people say, supporting the men in their lives. Consider some **Palestinian idioms used on an almost daily basis:**

- “Women are born with half a brain.” المرأة ناقصة عقل ودين
- “A mother’s anxiety over her daughter goes to the grave.” هم البنات للممات
- “No matter what you do or where you go, you will end up in the kitchen.” اخرة البنات المطبخ

In my walk of life, in my career life, and in my personal life, I have met and worked with so many women. What I notice is that women are so smart. They hold important positions in schools and in banks and other vocations. Additionally, women are most often the educators who walk with their children, teaching them and trying to raise them the proper way. If we have the privilege and challenge of raising our children, and if we are respected in certain positions, why should we accept silence in others?

There is more to say. Sometimes we think religion or church will free us from such mentality, but the truth is, it doesn't. Most churches in Palestine and Israel prohibit women from using their God-given skills.

Women are not looked at primarily as teachers or leaders, but as second-class citizens, those valued for quietly keeping the children in line while the men teach and preach and gain respect in their community.

**[CHRISTIAN -- WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A CHRISTIAN IN THIS CONTEXT]**

I am a woman. And I am a Christian. What does it mean for me to be a Palestinian *Christian* woman?

It means that I turn to the Biblical text as a source of inspiration.

Yet often the scriptures have been quoted and texts have been used to dehumanize and subjugate women.

The African American womanist theologian Wil Gafney speaks at length about gender, power and marginalization in the Scriptures, and there is much we can learn from one another, reading across times and cultures and traditions, and I bring some of what I have learned from her here.

I recall a very powerful story about a simple woman who came to greatness, not because she chose it, but because she was treated unjustly, and yet she came out on the other side. She serves a particular place in the story, a place we women know well. She is important due to her relationship with an important man, and we do not know much about her from her perspective, as it didn't serve the

writer's interest to tell us where she came from, what she loved, those she left behind and the emotional cost of the injustices imposed on her.

I would like to share a little about Hagar from Genesis 16. Hagar is considered the mother to many nations. But let us be more specific. Hagar is looked at as the mother of the Arab people. She is recalled not only in the biblical account but in the Muslim tradition. While she is not mentioned in the Qur'an, Hagar (Hajar) is spoken of in the hadith, the reports and accounts connected to the Prophet Muhammad's life.

In Islam, Hagar (Hajar) is the mother of Ibrahim's heir, the first born child. Part of Hajar's flight into the wilderness is remembered during the annual *hajj*, and many people do not know that the Arabic word for Hagar and *hajj* are connected.

Genesis 16 does not tell us how Hagar became a slave. Was she born a slave? Where was her family from? The author does not think it is important to tell us. We do not even know her real name, for she is an **"other."** HaGar means "the foreigner" or "the alien" in Hebrew.

In Genesis 16 we see that Hagar has no say over her body or to whom her body is given. She is an "other" by all measures, as she is female, she is foreign, she is a slave. However, she does have something Sarai does not – fertility. Until today many people value women only if they

bear children. And so Hagar is used for that one thing she is deemed valuable for.

Some interpretations of the Bible look at Hagar as cursed. Sarah (the mother of Isaac and the Jewish people) is considered blessed and Hagar cursed. But that is not true. Hagar was also blessed. When she was forced from Sarah's home, she was deserted and alone with her son Ishmael. She was desperate, and she cried out to God.

Did God respond to her cry? A messenger of God, who often functions as God in disguise, came to her. And not only did God respond, God met her needs. This is the very first 'theophany' in the bible - the very first time we see God appear! Isn't it amazing that God first appeared to a woman? And not only to *any woman*, but to the mother of the Arab peoples?

This my fellow sisters, my fellow brothers, is the way we need to learn to approach the text. We need to read the text again, across time and cultures. Wil Gafney shares, *"Hagar is also revered as a matriarch by many African American Christians, who find resonances between her enslavement, sexual abuse, and ultimate liberation... and the experiences of enslaved African women in the Americas and Caribbean."*

Dear brothers and sisters, let us learn new lessons from Hagar's story that African American Christians can teach us from their struggles for liberation, and let us bless women as God blessed Hagar.

[PEACEMAKER -- WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A PEACEMAKER IN THIS CONTEXT]

I am a woman. I am a Christian. And I am a peacemaker. What does it mean for me to be a Palestinian Christian woman who is a peacemaker?

When people want to know about Palestinian women peacemakers, they want to know about the peace and reconciliation we engage in. I have been committed to working for peace and justice alongside my Israeli brothers and sisters for many years. But it's important to note -- peace is not passive, and peace is *not* silent. As you know well from your own context and struggles -- Peace **protests**, peace **acts**, peace **disrupts** the status quo. I am committed to working for peace, and I am committed to learning with and from my brothers and sisters around the world, but I would also like to address another, less discussed aspect of peacemaking.

Many times people want to hear from women when they talk about peace, or they need a token woman to speak at their conferences. But what about all the other areas in our lives and churches and

**communities?** If we women are an important part of the church and the Palestinian community, why are we not 50% of society's leaders, of church leaders, of conference speakers? How is this expressed in your South African context, brothers and sisters? I have challenged my own Palestinian community -- where are the places they make for women when conferences are over and we are no longer needed to fill a quota or be a token woman leader?

I am a Palestinian. I am a Christian. And I am a woman. I want to see Palestinians use their influence for peace. I want to see Christians use their influence for peace. And I want to see women use their influence for peace. I want to see people welcomed to the table -- with all aspects of their identity -- and Palestinian Christian women bring their unique experiences and wisdom -- and we seek to share our struggles and hard won wisdom in our conflict, just as we seek to learn from other brothers and sisters at home and around the world.

And, to you my dear brothers and sisters in the international community, sometimes we feel that people want to hear our success stories without regard for our ongoing struggles, not only in the conflict but in our daily lives in our communities and churches. You can play an

important role in supporting us not only theologically and nationally, but also in supporting equality for Palestinian women.

When you support our conferences and come and visit us and invite us to your countries, you can ask to hear from more of our women, not just our men. As important as we believe it is that Christians who come to the Holy Land not only meet Jews but also Palestinians, we also believe it's important that you not only meet Palestinian men but Palestinian women! **You can enforce our inferior status or you can help us overcome it by insisting that women should be equally represented among the speakers, theologians, and figures you meet and hear from.**

Part of what I do is empower women and remind them they are capable and they are worthy, whether or not society allows them roles and opportunities. I encourage women to speak up if something is wrong, to speak against injustice if they are treated unjustly. I try to inspire women to work on appreciating themselves and to believe that they are just as able as the men in our community. Sometimes when you continue to hear you are not worthy, when you are told you have half a brain, that you bring anxiety to your mother or can bring shame on your family, when you are told you belong in the kitchen, then you start to believe that is true, and you become less confident in yourself.

When my Palestinian community denies us a chance to speak equally, when the international community is not interested in actively supporting Palestinian women and insisting that they hear from us as well, this results in creating a big wall, exactly like the apartheid wall we have around the West Bank. This wall divides our community. It divides men and women. It keeps women from being able to use their gifts in the context of church and society. **And this wall must come down.**

Let us once again look at the story of Hagar. When Hagar cried out to God, the LORD heard her cry. Wil Gafney writes about Hagar's encounter with God. When she runs away, God appears to her as a divine messenger. In Genesis 16:13, we see that God revealed Godself to her as YHWH (Yahweh, or the LORD in capital letters). But Hagar does not call God by this name. Instead, Gafney writes, Hagar *"gives God a new name, one of her choosing. She calls God El Ro'i: "God Who Has Seen Me" or "God Whom I Have Seen." This naming of God by a person is without precedent, nor is there any following example of someone naming God in the Scriptures."*

I would like to suggest that in Palestinian Christian society, our men are seen as the chosen children, the children of Sarah, the ones to whom the promises of leadership and blessing are given, and our women are seen as those who are unworthy of leadership, brought back in when

we are needed, and rejected when others think we are no longer useful. Dear friends here today -- I challenge you -- how is this in your context?

I challenge my fellow Palestinian *and South African* women - you are seen by God, God sees you, and you are worthy. In the tradition of Hagar, we have a special place, and we can call God by a new name and proclaim this among our people! This can bring a message of peace, not only in the peace and social justice work we are committed to with those we are in conflict, but also a message of true, sustainable peace within our home community as well.

**[CONCLUDING THOUGHTS ]**

My brothers and sisters, I implore you, do not allow these stories to overlook us, let your conferences continue without us, assuming our silence is self-imposed rather than chosen by others over us.

This is a chance for us to allow the story of Hagar to challenge us, to provide a place for Palestinian Christian and South African women who believe that women are as worthy and competent as men. I am talking about a vision of women and our role in society as being inclusive and a mutual blessing. I know our communities have lots of brokenness and complicated family relationships. Our society must create space for all of these people to use their gifts, regardless of whether they are an

“other” in our community, as Hagar was in hers. For we have no idea what beautiful message of worth and value can come from the line of a woman who was treated unjustly.

This my friends, is a little of what it means for me to be a woman, a Christian, and a peacemaker. It is protest, it is action, it is disruption, and there is a place and a role for all of us.

May we support and affirm the gifting of all people within our communities - men, women - and also children! - and see that our community will never be completely whole until all of us are freed to use our gifts to the glory of God.