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The Global Campaign to Stop Killing and Stoning Women!

In 26th November, 2007, at Istanbul Bilgi University, Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML) launched the Global Campaign Stop Killing and Stoning Women! to end the persistent misuse of religion and culture to justify killing women as punishment for violating the 'norms' of sexual behaviour as defined and imposed by vested interests.

The speakers included: Shadi Sadr (Iran), Ayesha Imam (Nigeria), Sri Wiyanti Eddyono (Indonesia), Nebahat Akkoç (Turkey), Yakin Ertürk (UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, and Farida Shaheed ([Shirkat Gah Women's Resource Centre](#) in Lahore, Pakistan).

The Campaign is inspired by and grows out of women's struggles in their own locations to combat various manifestations of this phenomenon, for instance in Pakistan, Indonesia, Iran and Nigeria. The Campaign supports and enables women's rights advocates, national and transnational women's movements to resist those forces which politicise and mis-use culture and religion for subjugating women and for the abuse of their human rights.

The Global Campaign to Stop Killing and Stoning Women! was initiated by a group of activists, lawyers, journalists and academics, who are committed to ending the killing and stoning of women. Stoning to death is a legal form of punishment for sexual intercourse outside marriage by persons who are married, as *zina* (which covers sexual relations outside of heterosexual marriage), is a crime in Afghanistan, Iran, Nigeria (in about one-third of 36 states), Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and the United Arab Emirates. Women constitute nearly all those condemned to death by stoning because discriminatory laws and customs almost always assign more guilt to women than to men in any manner of action that is seen as violating 'norms' of sexual behaviour, especially any instance of alleged sexual relations outside marriage (*zina*). Men are entitled to marry more than one woman and can use this justification for sex outside marriage. They are also more mobile and can more easily escape punishment.

The stoning to death of women and other forms of so-called 'honour killings' - along with other tortuous forms of violence such as flogging, acid-throwing and prescribed rape - are wholly unacceptable violations of women's human rights. There is no excuse for violence against women and the freedom of belief does not mean the freedom to kill.

The Global Campaign to 'Stop Killing and Stoning Women!' urges the United Nations to investigate these grave infringements of International Human Rights Law, and appeals to the international community to send a clear message that it is unacceptable for women to be tortured and killed. For more detailed information, outlining the various regions where stoning is a prescribed punishment for sexual relations outside of heterosexual marriage and addressing the mis-use of cultural justifications for violence against women, please see here http://www.wluml.org/english/news/campaign_concept_paper.pdf.

The Launch was followed by an International Forum , Violence, Women: "Rejecting 'cultural' justifications for violence against women", co-organized by the City University of Hong Kong, SEARC, WEMC, the Centre for Migration Research and Istanbul Bilgi University. For more information, see <http://www.wluml.org>, and <http://www.stop-stoning.org>

Report by Giulia Girardi - WLUML ICO

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"Compromising women's rights is not an option. Therefore, the challenge that confronts us today is to respect and prize our diverse cultures while developing common strategies to resist oppressive practices in the name of culture, and to promote and uphold universal human rights while rejecting encroachments grounded in ethnocentric thinking."

---Report of the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, Yakin Ertürk 'Intersections between culture and violence against women'.

EDITORIAL & SOLIDARITY

Solidarity

Iran: Delaram Ali's Sentence Temporarily Suspended

12/11/2007: The lawyer of Delaram Ali, a women's rights defender arrested at a peaceful demonstration last year, says Iran's judiciary has temporarily suspended her sentence. On 10 Nov. WLUML and 6 other international human rights organizations demanded that the Iranian authorities immediately set aside the prison sentence and drop charges against others facing trial because of their peaceful activities demanding equal rights for women in Iran.

<http://www.wluml.org/english/actionsfulltxt.shtml?cmd%5B156%5D=i-156-558446>

Belgrade: Attack on Women in Black

6/10/2007: WLUML expressed its support for Women in Black (WiB) – Belgrade, whose activities were again attacked with the vandalism of a PACE [i.e., peace] flag at a public event, the Women's NGO Fair. WiB-Belgrade has come under attack for their political views and activities since 2005. Numerous personal threats, including death threats, have been made to members of the group.

[http://www.wluml.org/english/newsfulltxt.shtml?cmd\[157\]=x-157-557656](http://www.wluml.org/english/newsfulltxt.shtml?cmd[157]=x-157-557656)

Myanmar: Joint NGO statement supporting Human Rights Defenders in Burma

10/10/2007: Human rights organizations from around the world are concerned for the safety and freedom of human rights activists within Burma following the brutal crackdown on peaceful protestors.

<http://www.wluml.org/english/actionsfulltxt.shtml?cmd%5B156%5D=i-156-557545>

Pakistan: Letter to UN Special Rapporteurs Urging Action Against Martial Law

10/11/2007: WLUML's letter to UN Special Rapporteurs and UN Human Rights Bodies expresses our alarm and grave concern regarding the mass arrests, ill-treatment and flagrant violations of the human rights of members of the judiciary, the legal profession and civil society that is currently taking place in Pakistan. We urge them to appeal to General Musharraf to restore the constitution, the judiciary, the media, and to end all arrests and violence against peaceful protests. On 3 Nov., martial law was imposed in Pakistan.

<http://www.wluml.org/english/actionsfulltxt.shtml?cmd%5B156%5D=i-156-558420>

Saudi Arabia: Rape victim pardoned by king of Saudi Arabia

(AP / New York Times)

18/12/2007: Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah has pardoned a female rape victim who had been sentenced to 200 lashes for being alone with a man at the time of the attack who was not related to her, reported a Saudi newspaper.

[http://www.wluml.org/english/newsfulltxt.shtml?cmd\[157\]=x-157-559553](http://www.wluml.org/english/newsfulltxt.shtml?cmd[157]=x-157-559553)

COMMENDATION

6/12/2007: WLUML congratulates Afghan women's rights activist and long-standing WLUML networker, **Najia Haneefi** on being the 2007 winner of the coveted **International Service award for women's human rights**.

The award ceremony was held on 5th December at the House of Commons in London (UK).

[http://www.wluml.org/english/newsfulltxt.shtml?cmd\[157\]=x-157-558896](http://www.wluml.org/english/newsfulltxt.shtml?cmd[157]=x-157-558896)

Editorial

It is with great pleasure that we present the Fifth Issue of the Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML) Newsletter!

This issue features news, analysis and perspectives from networkers from around the world. It highlights three important events which took place in the network in recent months: the launch of the Global Campaign to Stop Killing and Stoning Women on 26th November in Istanbul (Turkey), the very successful 'Feminism in the Muslim World' – Third Leadership Institute and the WLUML Annual General Meeting held in October in Penang (Malaysia).



Participants at the WLUML Feminism in the Muslim World – Third Leadership Institute, Penang, October 2007.

This year's Annual General Meeting saw changes to the WLUML Council and Board of Directors through a process of elections. To the existing membership of the Council were added Roya Rahmani (from Afghanistan), Samia Allalou (from Algeria), Maimuna Merican (from Malaysia), Ziba Mir-Hosseini (from Iran) and Fahima Hashim (from Sudan). From the Board of Directors, Sultana Kamal (from Bangladesh), Faizun Zackariya (from Sri Lanka) and Lynn Freedman (from the USA) stepped down. In their place, Homa Hoodfar (Iran), Zarizana Abdul Aziz (Malaysia) and Fatou Sow (Senegal) were elected by (and from within) the Council as the new Directors. We welcome all these friends in their new capacities in the network and look forward to working with them. We would also like to thank the outgoing Directors, Sultana Kamal, Lynn Freedman and Faizun Zackariya for their invaluable contribution to WLUML over the past several years.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge Branwyn Poleykett who skilfully coordinated the preparation of this issue with great dedication and enthusiasm.

Happy Reading!

Ayesha Salma Kariapper

Deputy Coordinator, International Coordination Office, WLUML

Disclaimer: The analysis and views expressed in this newsletter do not necessarily reflect those of any offices of the Women Living Under Muslim Laws –International Solidarity Network (WLUML) and the responsibility for all opinions, views and accuracy of information contained in this publication rests entirely with individual contributors.

NEWS FROM NETWORKERS

'Feminism in the Muslim World': Third Leadership Institute

Women Living Under Muslim Laws – international solidarity network organised the 'Feminism in the Muslim World' Third Leadership Institute, held in Penang, Malaysia from 22nd October to 2nd November 2007

Following the success of the 1998 and 1999 'Feminism in the Muslim World' Leadership Institutes (held in Turkey and Nigeria respectively), WLUMML revived this two-week, intensive residential training course as a way to introduce active networkers to the "heart and soul" of WLUMML: strengthening local women's movements while building global solidarity and networking.

WLUMML's Leadership Institutes are unique in their scope: they are designed specifically to meet the needs of feminist activists in Muslim contexts in a proactive way by transferring knowledge and feminist analysis from experienced academics, researchers and activists to those who may not be new to activism but who are new to the WLUMML network.

The Feminism in the Muslim World Leadership Institutes seek to challenge the rhetoric of all those who claim that feminism is a Western issue, concept and project. Women Living Under Muslim Laws seeks to reclaim feminism by:

- a) looking at our own roots and history by focusing on prominent historical feminist figures in Muslim countries and communities, and
- b) showing the wide scope of feminist activities that currently exist in Muslim countries and communities.

This year's training course was targeted towards young and emerging women's rights activists working in grassroots organisations and leading campaigns for human rights in their local contexts. Such a specific training was intended to strengthen their capabilities and potential to disseminate information regarding women's human rights in Muslim countries and communities in the face of increasing fundamentalisms. Global exposure and initiation to networking at the transnational level has proved to be particularly important for those who wish to work with other feminists across cultural and geographical boundaries.

The Institutes provide essential capacity-building and leadership skills and emphasise themes of global solidarity and networking, diversities and commonalities within the 'Muslim world' as well as feminist organising for human rights education in Muslim countries and communities. The training course was organised in three main areas:

- 1) raising and discussing conceptual issues,
- 2) collective strategizing, and offering concrete skills for individual and organisational development

This year's Leadership Institute was attended by twenty-six participants, coming from Algeria, Bangladesh, Egypt, France, India, Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia, Niger, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Sudan (see following page for the participants' feedback).



The seventeen trainers and facilitators who led the sessions came from Senegal, Nigeria, India, Pakistan, Iran, Mexico, Croatia, Malaysia, Hong Kong, and the USA.

A field trip was organized for one day of the training. The participants and trainers visited four local human rights organisations and one academic institute for Gender Studies, and had the chance to learn about and network with local activists in Penang.

The organisations that kindly hosted our participants were:

- Women's Centre for Change (WCC) <http://www.wccpenang.org/wcc/>
- World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action (WABA) <http://www.waba.org.my/>
- Kanita: Women's Development Research Centre, at the University of Science Malaysia (USM) <http://www.usm.my/kanita/>
- Third World Network (TWN) <http://www.twinside.org.sg/>
- Consumers Association of Penang (CAP) <http://en.cap.org.my/>

Some of the sessions during the course also included human rights film screenings, such as:

- Divorce Iranian Style (dir. Ziba Mir Hosseini, 1998, UK/Iran, 80 min)
- Eclipse [Grohonkal] (Ain-O-Salish Kendra, 1994, Bangladesh, 35 min)
- Fiesta Feminista (Malaysia, 13 min)
- Money, Money, Money (AWID, 3 min)
- Dead Mums Don't Cry (Panorama, UK, 2005)

Women Living Under Muslim Laws plans to continue the Leadership Institutes as a recurring event, rotating the hosting of the Institute every two years between our regional coordination offices in Asia and Africa/Middle East, ensuring a space for a diverse range of networkers and activists from around the globe.

I would like to thank Louise Finn for her superb support in organising this year's Leadership Institute.

Report by Giulia Girardi – WLUMML ICO

NVI: Participants' Reflections

"When I return to my country, my husband, my children and my colleagues will see that I am a changed person. After these two weeks I feel absolutely empowered." (participant from Nigeria)

"I didn't think feminist and women's issues were important to me until my father announced he was going to take a second wife. That's how I became interested in feminist work." (participant from Indonesia)

"What makes me angry? Rape. I just read in the newspaper the headline: 'Rape in Congo reaches epidemic proportions.' Rape is not a disease; it's not something we are powerless to change." (participant from Pakistan/Canada)

"You always find what you want to look for in al-Quran.. If you have already decided that abortion is a form of family planning you will find certain verses in the Quran. If you believe that abortion is a murder, you will find other verses. You have to know yourself first." (participant from Indonesia)

"I don't want to focus on issues of conflict and violence all the time. But in my country when a woman is raped, she is liable to be punished for adultery. So I have to focus on ending war and ending violence." (participant from Sudan)

"I am hopeful when I see people in situations of extreme adversity persevering with laughter. I was raised to believe that laughter can get you into any situation you want to be in, can get you out of any situation you do not want to be in, and can get you through anything. A lightness of heart is what encourages me to continue." (participant from Canada/Pakistan)

"I was very happy to join NVI in Penang because it opened my eyes to see how many problems are faced by women in different Muslim societies. I was only concerned with the Tafsir and didn't pay attention to Fiqh. Now, I'm really interested in Fiqh even still in the Tafsir perspective. Straight after the Leadership Institute in Penang I am now trying to build "Woman and Al-Qur'an research center". I have already rented a house for it and hopefully I can start soon to do research with my students on verses used in the marriage topic in some Fiqh books and then analyse if Fiqh scholars were biased way in selecting and interpreting verses?" (participant from Indonesia)

WLUML AGM

The WLUML Annual General Meeting (AGM) was held in Penang, Malaysia on 27th October 2007. The meeting was attended by members of the Board of Directors, the WLUML Council and representatives of the International Coordination Office (ICO) and the two Regional Coordination Offices (RCO): Zarizana Abdul Aziz, Lynn Freedman, Homa Hoodfar, Katayoon Hoodfar, Ayesha Imam, Sultana Kamal, Sindi Medar-Gould, Farida Shaheed, Faizun Zackariya, Codou Bop, Mehreen Malik, Ayesha Salma Kariapper and Aisha Lee Shaheed.

The three coordination offices shared their update of activities of the past year. The ICO team introduced their new Volunteer Programme which proactively meets a priority objective of the Plan of Action – Senegal 2006 in systematically encouraging new and emerging activists to become involved in the network. Since summer 2007, twelve volunteers have worked at the ICO. The ICO provided a review of the programmatic and organisational development achievements of the year including achievements in publications, collective projects and solidarity actions undertaken over the year. With the support of RCO-Asia, the ICO organized the third Feminism in the Muslim World Leadership Institute held in Penang (see Page 3 for details). An outline of WLUML collective projects (trainings and exchanges) was also presented to the Council which will be conducted in collaboration with the regional coordination offices.

The RCO-AME, housed at *Groupe de Recherche sur les Femmes et les Lois au Senegal* (GREFELS), provided an update on capacity-building, fundraising, and networking activities in the Africa and Middle East region. Representatives of RCO-AME will participate in an upcoming international conference on family law and looked forward to hosting the next Feminism in the Muslim World (fourth) Leadership Institute in 2009. RCO-AME will continue planning its training workshops as WLUML collective projects.

RCO-Asia presented an update of their progress in WLUML publications and translation activities as well as solidarity actions in the region, such as linking up with other human rights and civil society groups in Pakistan to demonstrate against the growing 'talibanization' in the country. RCO-Asia and the ICO will jointly organize capacity-building workshops on preparing effective shadow reports for the CEDAW process, and using new media for advocacy and solidarity campaigns.

Looking forward, over the coming months WLUML will have a redesigned website offering greater user-friendliness and interactivity.



At this AGM elections were held for the WLUML Council and Board of Directors. We are pleased to welcome Samia Allalou, Fahima Hashim, Ziba Mir-Hosseini, and Roya Rahmani to the WLUML Council. We are also pleased to welcome Homa Hoodfar and Fatou Sow to the Board of Directors.

Report by Aisha Lee Shaheed – WLUML ICO

Activists' Reflections

Fifth London Kurdish Film Festival

The 5th London Kurdish Film Festival, held in London in November, featured a programme of films addressing human rights issues affecting Kurdish women.



Two of these films focused on violence against women in Kurdish communities. In the Name of

Tradition was the first documentary addressing the issue of female genital mutilation (FGM) to be made in Iran. The film follows a young university student researching FGM in the Iranian Kurdish community. A wide range of voices are represented in the film: practitioners of FGM, older women who insist that FGM is a traditional practice which must be preserved, doctors and other community health professionals and young people. The young people express a range of opinions; the young women claim their right to sexual pleasure whilst some young male participants express unease that abandoning FGM might lead to a 'Westernisation' of Iranian society. It was a bold and powerful film that engages with the diversity of viewpoints on FGM and the ways in which the practice is related to national and ethnic identities.

What Happened to Us is a deeply shocking and powerful exploration of "honour" killings and self immolation in Kurdish communities. It focuses on women's groups struggling to bring to light the scale of the problem and to examine how the moral policing and scrutiny of women's sexual lives leads to honour killings and to high rates of suicide amongst young women.

The Kurdish Film Festival is becoming *the* annual foreign film event in London; this year saw an impressive crush of devotees at the opening gala in the Rio cinema. The atmosphere is uniquely intimate and good-humoured – so happy are the largely Kurdish audience to hear their language on screen, that even scenes of very black humour are greeted with uproarious laughter; the non-Kurdish viewer aware that the humour and pathos of the Kurds' predicament is partly lost in translation. One of the most extraordinary films of last year's festival, *Requiem of Snow*, narrowly missed an Oscar for best foreign language film. It is a credit to the Kurdish Diaspora that they continue to produce such nuanced and bold films exploring issues of sexuality, gender and identity in Muslim communities

For more information about the Film Festival, please visit www.lkff.co.uk

Branwyn Poleykett and Eleanor Kilroy

Speaking Out Against Violence in Algeria

In July 2001 working women in the Southern Algerian city of Hassi Messaoud were brutally attacked and raped by a mob of three hundred men. *Lalia Ducos* writes on the legacy of the events of 2001 and the concerns of Algerian Human Rights organisations over the new Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation which Human Rights Watch claims 'reinforces a climate of impunity' that has contributed to the country's human rights crisis since the Civil War - referred to in Algeria as the 'National Tragedy' - began in 1991.

The mobilisation of Algerian Women's Associations continues to be organised around one major axis: violence against women. The tragedy of the women of Hassi Messaoud has left a deep impression on our minds and will continue to resonate in the history of Algerian associations and their partners in France. After having been subjected to various pressures many of the women abandoned legal proceedings against those who had attacked or raped them. Women's groups attempting to intervene after the events at Hassi Messaoud were confronted with several difficulties: lack of coordination, difficulties in obtaining permission from the authorities to access victims in protected zones as well as blackmail and pressure by the families of the attackers. Out of thirty-nine victims, only two finally upheld their complaint while the rest simply disappeared.

Women's groups in Algeria work under challenging conditions and receive neither financial nor material support from state institutions. For example, AFEPEC (Women's Association for Personal Freedom and Free Citizenship) were recently instructed by local authorities in Oran to vacate the premises that they had been renting for several years. A large protest was organised in support of AFEPEC and as a consequence, the expulsion order was suspended. Associations like AFEPEC rely entirely on the support of foreign donors to conduct the work that they do.

In 2007 the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Louise Arbour, visited Algeria. She met not only with official and formally constituted institutions but also with individual rights campaigners. Among the voices heard were those of the women of Hassi Messaoud. The Commissioner encouraged Algeria to lift its reservations on the CEDAW and strengthen efforts to end all forms of discrimination against women. She also expressed her concern regarding the legal texts promulgated under the 'Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation'. In particular the article which states that "in adopting this Charter by their sovereign authority, the Algerian people affirm that no one in Algeria or abroad is empowered to use or to instrumentalize the wounds of the national tragedy to harm the institutions of the Democratic and Popular Republic of Algeria, to weaken the State, to undermine the honour of all its agents who served with dignity, or to tarnish the image of Algeria internationally."

A seminar organised by the families of victims of the 'National Tragedy' was scheduled to go ahead in February 2007. It was cancelled at the last minute by the Algerian authorities with no explanation. This seminar would have brought together civil society actors, representatives of the victims, politicians, journalists, lawyers and intellectuals as well as experts in transitional justice and international law. This meeting would have enabled a dialogue, indispensable for an individual and collective reconstruction, in order that we might avoid an intergenerational transmission of trauma and establish a lasting peace.

Obstacles to Women's Empowerment in Afghanistan

On the eve of the Global Campaign for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, *Wazhma Frogh* writes on the myths of women's empowerment in Afghanistan and the potential for lasting change.



While the US bombing was justified in Afghanistan under the flag of "liberating women", six years on, I still wonder what this really means for Afghan women. Did 'unveiling' women mean 'liberating' them?

Everyday we hear that millions of dollars are poured into development programs to support women in Afghanistan but still the country has the second highest mortality rate in the world. 80% of women and girls in the country face severe domestic violence and more than 85% of marriages are forced and often the bride is a minor. Although Afghanistan ratified the Convention to Eliminate all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in March 2003, only 1% of domestic violence cases were reported in 2006. 39,000 foreign troops are currently present in the country yet schools for girls in most rural areas are not secure. So what's going wrong? Or maybe the more appropriate question is: what's going right for women? To understand this dilemma more clearly I would like to briefly outline the road map that Afghan women have taken from 2001 until today.

**"I would be a happy woman if I were accepted as a human being, even under my blue burkha. Unveiling does not give me my human rights, nor does it give my husband any justification for not beating me".
35 year old woman, Kabul.**

The notion of "gender" officially entered into Afghanistan's elite circles very soon after the fall of the Taliban with the influence of the international community and foreign donor agenda. The concept of gender equality and "women's empowerment" that took shape in many Western countries ignored the brute realities of this country. The issues that women of Afghanistan have faced for centuries are not just the "religious and cultural restrictions" that are generously recorded in donor reports. Little attention was made to women's rights could be advanced in Afghanistan by learning from successful strategies in other non-Western contexts

It was important for us at that time to affirm that no judicial reform can succeed if we ignore the role of customary laws and non-state actors. During years of war and instability that describe contemporary Afghan history, these local decision-making

structures have been the main avenue for every man and woman to seek justice.

Similarly, it was also important to understand no "gender programming" could be successful without addressing women's access to health and that no health projects could improve the health of women and children if we didn't take account of the traditional ways of treatment. Such coping strategies that were adopted by ordinary citizens in the absence of a central government for over twenty years of conflict have not been acknowledged in the new planning process.

As an Afghan, I can strongly argue that there is no single Afghan culture that is unique throughout the country and indeed social practices are different in each village and region depending on its geographic, political, economic situation and context of conflict.

Roughly 85% of Afghans live in rural areas, and yet this huge majority is generally ignored in favour of the educated urban elite when planning macro and national level empowerment programs. Mostly, power relations at the family level are influenced by social, cultural and economical conditions of individuals or groups of people in a community. In every report about Afghanistan we read that due to rigid cultural norms, women of Afghanistan have been deprived of human rights but most of these reports have failed to explore what these so-called culturally-defined rigid codes for women actually are; and whether they impact only women, and, if so, why?

The failure of women's empowerment initiatives doesn't rest solely with the complex socio-cultural setting of Afghanistan. From the outset, the entire process has lacked consistency, commitment and accountability. While the establishment of the Ministry of Women's Affairs in 2001 gave cause for optimism, we cannot ignore the fact that the ministry is isolated and lacks authority. It is obvious that one woman in a cabinet of 27 ministers will not be heard, especially, if the people around her are not supportive of women's empowerment. There are too many international and national NGOs and contractors with their respective "gender policies" who more often than not work in isolation and fail to cooperate and communicate among themselves, much less with the government.

In conclusion, I would like to recommend that if the international community is really serious about women's empowerment in Afghanistan, they need to put their words into strategic actions with strong accountability mechanisms. In order for the current situation of Afghan women to improve, every effort should be made to strengthen education and health services for women and girls. Educating women and girls and ensuring their access to healthcare is the first step towards building an educated society respectful of the rights of all its citizens.

Wazhma Frogh, Independent Women's Human Rights Activist, Afghanistan

Towards a Interpretation of the Qur'an

Qutub Jahan, Executive Director of the Centre for the Study of Society and Secularism in Mumbai, India, shares her experience of conducting workshops on progressive interpretation of Islamic texts in India.

"Is the Qur'an anti-women?" This is a question that comes up in every workshop that we run on the 'Rights of Women in the Qur'an: Theory and Practice'. Members of India's minority Muslim population are governed by Muslim personal law for matters such as marriage, divorce, child custody and inheritance. However, Indian Shariah law reflects the distinctive history of Indian Islam and has been shaped by Hindu customary law and by the interventions of British lawyers. Lack of access to religious knowledge prevents Indian Muslim women from challenging existing interpretations of Shariah law. Women who attend the training workshops are educated and empowered to challenge aspects of Muslim personal law through a close reading of the Qur'an.

The workshops address the ways in which Islam enhanced the status of Indian women by discarding certain pre-Islamic practices and also by reforming existing customs. While discussing the origin and development of Islam the status of women in the pre-Islamic period is highlighted and participants discover how, with the development of Islam, women were given equal rights and dignity. Spiritual equality, responsibility and accountability for both men and women are well-developed themes in the Qur'an. Spiritual equality between men and women in the sight of God is not limited to purely spiritual and religious issues, but is the basis for equality in all temporal aspects of human endeavour.

Participants are often surprised to discover the Qur'anic verses that deal with gender equality. All the verses relating to women's issues and gender equality are comprehensively discussed with a special focus on the context of revelation, that is, the historical background providing the primary reasons or causes underlying the revelation of a Qur'anic verse to the Prophet. This context may help to better elucidate its meaning and, with regard to the Sunnah, the event or the incident that occasioned the statement or action of the Prophet. One topic that generates great interest among the participants is the evolution of Shariah including a move towards a more patriarchal and discriminatory interpretation of the texts and the position of women in the *a-hadith*.

Participants in the workshops are empowered to demand Islamic reformation and a renewal of adherence to the Islamic ideals of a just society through training in how to interpret the Qur'an on particular issues with the aim of countering deep-rooted patriarchal, misogynistic interpretations. This will help them in engaging in dialogue with the local Imam and encourage them to voice their concerns and strongly denounce *fatwas* on the grounds that they are un-Islamic and unjust. Participants in the workshops discuss landmark judgements in favour of women by the Apex court, which builds confidence in approaching the court to arbitrate in issues under secular law.

Publication: "Woman in Qur'an"

Compiled by Qutub Jahan Kidwai and Shirin Huda, "Woman in Qur'an" discusses women and Islam in a scriptural context. (CSSS)

"This primer on Muslim women's' rights is meant to create better understanding about their rights in the Qur'an.

Various Qur'anic verses have been misinterpreted to give women secondary position whereas Qur'an clearly pronounces gender equality. Also there are certain verses in Qur'an which have been interpreted to mean subjugation of women whereas the words, if carefully understood and read in conjunction with other verses on women in the Qur'an do not support any such subordination. This book is an attempt to explain these verses in proper context.

Qur'an is the first revealed scripture, which gave equal honour and dignity to women in every respect. However, patriarchal Muslim society never acceded equal dignity to women. Today Muslim women are demanding equality and there is need for such literature to rightly explain Qur'anic position to Muslim women. This primer, it is hoped, will fulfill this much needed objective."

Collective Action to Resist Militarization

The year 2007 witnessed a high level of peaceful dissent and protest from civil society against military dictatorship in Burma and Pakistan. Branwyn Poleykett and Gulnar Tabassum analyse what happened in these countries from the perspective of the protestors.

Burma

In Burma crowds of up to 100,000 anti government protestors took to the streets during August and September to campaign against widespread poverty and repressive political conditions. In an exclusive interview, representatives from The Women's League of Burma tell Branwyn Poleykett of the ordeal of the women who were at the forefront of these peaceful protests.

The ruling military Junta in Burma responded by detaining a reported 3,000 protestors, however, commentators in the country have placed the number of those estimated to have been detained or killed by the regime much higher. The Women's League of Burma was established in 1999 to highlight the plight of Burmese women and to work towards the greater participation of women in the pro-democracy movement and in processes of peace and national reconciliation. In a new report '*Courage to Resist: Women Human Rights Defenders of Burma*', they detail the human rights abuses carried out against women during the August and September crackdowns.

Since the crackdown on civil society activity that followed the September protests, the Women's League of Burma has sought to draw attention to Burmese women's experiences during the crisis and the role that gender has played in the brutal repression of civil society activism by the SPDC (the State Peace and Development Council, the official name of the military regime ruling Burma).



Women activists played a significant role in the pro-democracy protests and many were arrested. These women are vulnerable to sexual assault and harassment

from the police and also from the military and other authorities. The Women's League of Burma emphasise the importance of analysing women's vulnerability and denouncing the use of women's sexuality to discredit the monks who protested. Women have been forced to admit on camera that they have had sexual relationships with the monks.

"We know that the women activists who participated in the protests were arrested and imprisoned, and that some are on the run, hiding for fear of arrest. In fact, these women didn't do anything wrong. They should not have been arrested in the first place. It is really unjust putting them into jail. We are running and fleeing because we are afraid of SPDC's unfair treatment. Now I'm separated from my children. I don't want other women to suffer like me. Activists should be released, and stop being arrested unjustly. Some women had to leave their sick children. How heartbreaking!"

Burmese female activist, quoted in *Courage to Resist* (Women's League of Burma, 2007)

Pakistan

On 3rd November 2007, General Pervez Musharraf declared a state of emergency in Pakistan. Thousands were arbitrarily arrested and detained without charge in the first few days of emergency rule including Gulnar Tabassum who recounts her experience of arrest below.

It is not the first time that martial law has been used against civilian governments in Pakistan but this time President Musharraf used emergency powers against the judiciary, the media and the people of Pakistan which caused great concern. That is why when the chairperson of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) Ms. Asma Jahangir announced a public meeting on Sunday November 4th 2007 many people came to collectively analyse the situation.

Present at the meeting were around 60 people from different walks of life: lawyers, representatives of political parties, NGO workers, human rights defenders, representatives of Women's Action Forum and concerned citizens. The meeting started at 12:00 noon and it was underway when at around 2:15 police surrounded the Human Rights office and told us that they were there to arrest all the male participants. When we asked on what charges they did not answer or present us with a warrant.



LAHORE: Policewomen outside the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan office from where they picked up about 70 activists.
— Dawn

The women present refused to let them arrest the men and resisted the illegal arrest. After half an hour of arguments, resistance and frantic telephone calls, the police announced that they had been ordered to arrest everyone at the meeting. We were forced onto two police buses and taken to the police station. On arrival the women refused to be held separately from the men, so in the end they kept us in two

different rooms on the same floor and we did not allow them to lock the doors. Our spirits remained high during the process, the women were chanting revolutionary poems by the famous Urdu poets Habeeb Jalib and Faiz Ahmed Faiz. The news of our arrest spread like wildfire and a crowd of around 300 people gathered in front of the police station chanting anti-Musharraf slogans and demanding an end to the state of emergency.

The following morning we were presented before a Magistrate's court where we were charged. Our bail application was denied and we were sent to Kot Lakhpat Jail. The next day, November 6th, our lawyers and supporters managed to get us bailed out and most of our group was released apart from 6 people; two women, including myself and four men. That evening all the security people suddenly vanished from the jail and one non-uniformed man told us that we were free to go.

In this whole chaotic and confused episode a few things became clear to us: the police do not know how to deal with martial law and it appears that decisions are being taken by Musharraf himself. For many of us it was our first experience of martial law, although we had some older people in jail with us who had suffered under General Zia-ul-Haq's martial law. The young people kept our spirits high during our detention. Our sense of solidarity was strong and no one was prepared to leave alone. After our release we created an e-discussion to help us keep in touch and to move forward with our struggle against Musharraf's oppressive regime. — **By Gulnar Tabassum, Shirkat Gah – Women's Resource Centre, Lahore (Pakistan).**

This article was written before the December 27th 2007, assassination of Ms. Benazir Bhutto, former Prime Minister of Pakistan and the first woman in the world to lead a Muslim country. WLUML strongly condemns her murder and supports calls for an independent inquiry into her death.

REVIEWS

Rethinking Islam and Liberal Democracy: Islamist Women in Turkish Politics

Yesim Arat (State University of New York Press, 2005)

Both the media and political theorists turn increasingly towards the position of women as a means of judging the 'modernity' of nations. The women in question become a sort of weathervane, indicating the direction of the political wind; westerly for democracy and secularism, easterly for "traditional" forms of government and religious law.

In *Rethinking Islam and Liberal Democracy*, Yesim Arat sets out to undermine this simplistic binary logic, arguing that Turkish women need not be seen as trapped in a tug of war between two incompatible sets of values. Through a series of engaging interviews, Arat looks at the integral role played by female activists of the Islamic Refah (Welfare) Party in the eighties and nineties and considers the experiences of the women involved. She reveals how these women combined their secular lifestyles with Muslim beliefs in the fight for a version of liberalism that would tolerate religious expression; something that Kemalism failed to achieve in Turkey.

The women interviewed are identified only by their initials to allow them to speak freely and without fear of repercussions. One activist, identified as B.H., reveals her unease at the political prominence that accompanied public acts such as readopting the veil following the secular ban. She asserts: 'We are not different ... They do not understand us and call us reactionary. Well, we are not' (94). Arat maintains not only that the development of liberalism, in the sense of the value of individual rights, is possible in a Muslim environment, but also that both liberalism and democracy can be enhanced through an Islamic context. Accessible and enjoyable, Arat's second book is crucial reading for anyone interested in women's activism in Islamic contexts.

Review by Anna Simpson

Quissat: Short Stories by Palestinian Women

Edited by Jo Glanville, Telegram Books, London: 2006

In looking for stories for this anthology Glanville wanted to reflect the realities of Palestinian displacement: "The authors' addresses range from Texas to Ramallah. Some of them write in English and some in Arabic". Included are well known names such as Liana Badr, Laila Atrash and Nuha Samara, as well as Jean Said Makdisi who has worked with the women's movement in Lebanon and written on Arab women and feminism and whose autobiographical work *Teta, Mother and Me* is reviewed in the latest issue of *Al-Raida*. Unfortunately, Glanville has also chosen to include some very weak stories, seemingly tacked onto the end of the anthology. However, some writers to look out for are Randa Jarrar and Huzama Habayeb, the title of the whose short story *A Thread Snaps*, refers to the female narrator's delicate thread of sexual desire for a passing boy that is cruelly broken by her father's loud demands that she rub his feet.

Perhaps the freshest and most original story is by Salma Dabbagh, a British-Palestinian writer based in Bahrain. Her story entitled *Me (the Bitch) and Bustanji* is set in Kuwait during the Iraqi invasion. An early refrain, "God damn the boredom of being stuck in Kuwait all summer", sets the tone for a witty and contemporary narrative style that evokes the frustration of being a teenage girl in a conservative Arab country whilst avoiding the cliché of sensationalising adolescent rebellion. "My bitch status was normally confirmed for to me at least twice on the way back from Hajji's shop and more than that if I stopped for a cigarette. Once, when Nada and I tried to hide from the road, behind the wall of an apartment bloc, it had come from a woman in Arabic and was accompanied by a bucket of dirty water over our heads. Sometimes they were a joke, the lines coming out of the guys in the cars, 'Hey baby, you wear hair gel? Hey baby, you wanna come for a ride?' As the narrative progresses, however, it is her family's Palestinian gardener Bustanji that occupies more of her thoughts. Whilst the narrator's dual nationality, British/Hungarian, and her family's economically privileged status allows her and her Palestinian father to flee to Jordan through Iraq, Bustanji and his son Waheed face quite a different fate:

"We heard about Bustanji and Waheed months later. I watched the news by then, all of it, I saw the Palestinian Intifada and saw the build up to war with all its muscle and propaganda and hypocrisy ... And I squirmed when I saw the footage of Yasser Arafat kissing Saddam Hussein replayed again and again because I understood by then what it would mean for us". By "us" she means those Palestinians unable to leave Kuwait, who had their residency withdrawn and many of who, as in the case of Waleed, were murdered by angry mobs of Kuwaiti men. An important new literary voice, Dabbagh – whose own identity remains fluid, boldly maps out the borders that segregate people by nationality, class, education, political affiliation and gender; these all too real borders are often rendered invisible in nationalist literature.

Review by Eleanor Kilroy

The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World

By Nawal El Saadawi, Zedbooks (2007)

First published in Arabic in 1977, Nawal El Saadawi's classic investigation of the position of women in the Arab world has lost none of its power to shock. Drawing on both her personal experiences and on the stories collected from women patients over the course of her medical career El Saadawi analyses the factors; social, cultural and historical that have shaped the regulation of women's sexuality in the Arab world.

Running through the book is a robustly argued attack on the idea of Islamic exceptionalism. Focusing on Egypt El Saadawi sketches a history of women in the pre and post Islamic eras, arguing that women's oppression is a result of the capture of power by patriarchal elites, institutionalised in the patrilineal kinship arrangements which displaced ancient Egypt's predominantly matrilineal systems, rather than any essential attitude towards women embedded in Islam or Arab culture. Combining 'The Hidden Face of Eve' remains essential reading for anyone interested in women's activism in the Muslim world.

Review by Branwyn Poleykett

Also available in Telegram Books' Women's short stories series: *Hikayat: Short Stories by Lebanese Women*



UPCOMING EVENTS

AWID 2008 Forum: The Power of Movements



From November 14-17, 2008, up to 1500 women's rights leaders and activists from around the world will converge on Cape Town, South Africa at the 11th AWID International Forum to discuss the power of movements.

The International Forum on Women's Rights and Development is both a conference and a call to action. The largest recurring event of its kind, the AWID Forum brings together women's rights leaders and activists from around the world every three years to strategize, network, celebrate, and learn in a highly charged atmosphere that fosters deep discussions and sustained personal and professional growth.

Delegates to the Forum participate in four days of plenary speeches, interactive sessions, workshops, debates, and creative sessions geared to powerful thinking on gender equality and women's human rights. Delegates also participate in informal caucuses, gala events, cultural activities, and social and political events geared to global and regional networking and alliance-building.

Participants engage who engage fully in the Forum not only empower themselves with new tools and resources, but they also, collectively, re-politicize the gender and development community, strengthen alliances between women, and engage in work and thinking that is truly transformative rather than simply palliative.

Participation in the AWID Forum is open to anyone who works or has an interest in women's rights, international development, and social justice. AWID particularly welcomes women and men from the Global South, young women, and marginalized groups that have had difficulty getting their agenda heard on a global stage.

Deadline to apply: 28 Jan 2008

2008 Women's Leadership Scholarship

The women's leadership Scholarship Programme (formerly the Native Leadership Scholarship) is accepting applications from women leaders, organisers and activists from the global south and/or from indigenous groups, who wish to pursue non-doctoral graduate studies in human rights, sustainable development, and public health at accredited institutions worldwide. More details can be found at www.nativeleaders.org

Deadline to Apply: 14 March 2008

2008 Country reports of CEDAW state signatories

Countries that have ratified or acceded to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) are legally bound to put its provisions into practice. They are also committed to submit national reports, at least every four years, on measures they have taken to comply with their treaty obligations.

At the 40th Session of the CEDAW Committee (14 Jan - 1 Feb 2008, United Nations Office at Geneva) the following countries will be reporting:

Bolivia, Burundi, France, Lebanon, Luxembourg, Saudi Arabia, Morocco and Sweden

At the 41st Session of the CEDAW Committee (30 June - 18 July 2008), the following countries will be reporting:

Finland, Iceland, Lithuania, Nigeria, Slovakia, United Kingdom, Tanzania and Yemen

To read the country reports for the 40th and 41st Sessions, visit the UN website here:

<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/40sess.htm>

and

<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/41sess.htm>

As of January 2008, responsibility for servicing the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women will be transferred to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (<http://www.ohchr.org/>).

The [Trudeau Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies](#) at the [University of Toronto](#), Canada is seeking submissions from Palestinian and Israeli students concerning their views on the West Bank Wall/Security Fence. The Trudeau Centre periodically publishes a series of [Kiessling Research Papers](#) dealing with a wide range of topics with implications for peace, conflict, security, development, politics, and international relations. We are seeking submissions by Israelis and Palestinians who are affected by the wall/fence that will describe what the structure means to their identity, how they feel it fits in the history of relations between Israel and Palestine, their feelings about its effects on the present relations between Palestinian and Israeli communities, and its future implications for both Palestine and Israel.

Selected submissions will be published in a single Kiessling Paper, with the narratives being compared and analyzed in a political-historical context by a Canadian graduate student.

The goal of the paper is to understand the differing narratives of the wall/fence, and how this affects understandings of Self and Other among Palestinian and Israeli students.

Please submit a 1-2 page proposal by January 1st, 2008.

Selected applicants will be asked to write a full length paper thereafter. The papers will be written in English, with a minimum length of twenty-five (25) pages.

Deadline: March 31, 2008

For information on content, rules, and form of submissions please contact Craig D. Smith at

craigdamian.smith@utoronto.ca +31 (0)63 448 4175, or from December 24th to January 8th +1 613 260 0606

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