

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

Page:

1. WRRRC Programme
2. Editorial & Solidarity
3. WHRD & International Women's Day Statement
4. Women's Empowerment and Activism
6. News from Networkers
8. Reviews
10. Upcoming Events & Announcements

News from around the world, WLUML is an international network that provides information, solidarity and support for all women whose lives are shaped, conditioned or governed by laws and customs said to derive from Islam.

WOMEN RECLAIMING AND RE-DEFINING CULTURES PROGRAMME

From October 2008, WLUML and the Institute of Women's Empowerment (IWE) jointly embarked upon a three-year programme entitled "*Women reclaiming and re-defining cultures: Asserting rights over body, self, and public spaces*" (WRRRC programme). Supported by the MDG3 Fund, designed to fund work towards attaining the third Millennium Development Goal (namely 'Gender equality and the empowerment of women'), the WRRRC programme aims to contribute to the attainment of MDG3 by developing and supporting strategies for women's empowerment that can effectively counter disempowering forces. These forces often attempt to legitimise themselves by reference to 'culture', 'tradition' and 'religion', and are increasingly manifested as politico-religious fundamentalisms that exacerbate the vulnerable positions of women by reinforcing existing patriarchal structures and introducing new modes of oppression.

The WRRRC Programme maintains that it is crucial to discredit 'cultural' excuses used to legitimate the disempowerment of women.

Since its inception, the WRRRC programme has established a Strategic Task Force as a management and advisory committee, comprised of WLUML and IWE representatives. In addition, **three Working Groups** have been established to address different but inter-related aspects of women's disempowerment justified by cultural relativism: **Sexuality; Property, Inheritance and Land Rights**; and **Violence Against Women**. The latter Working Group builds upon the Global Campaign to Stop Killing and Stoning Women (www.stop-killing.org) and seeks to support new initiatives and strategies related to culturally-justified violence against women. Global in scope, over the coming years the WRRRC Programme will focus on the following focal countries: Afghanistan, Indonesia, Iran, Nigeria, Pakistan, Senegal, Sri Lanka and Sudan.

Until May 2009, WLUML Director Dr. Ayesha Imam has served as the Interim Coordinator of the WRRRC Programme and we sincerely thank her for her efforts and initiatives.

From May, we have been pleased to welcome Roya Rahmani as the permanent Programme Manager of the WRRRC Programme. Ms. Rahmani is a WLUML Council member and an active women's rights defender in both Afghanistan and North America.

Recent initiatives have included:

- extending support to 'sister campaigns' in Pakistan working to address so-called 'honour crimes' through art, and in Indonesia to advocate against a regressive Anti-Pornography Bill;
- supporting Pakistani and Indonesian activists in their struggle to break the silence around sexuality to enable activists to more effectively support people of mixed gender, different sexual orientations, sex workers and women whose human rights are violated related to social conceptions of female sexuality and reproductive roles;
- supporting Nigerian activists to conduct sensitization trainings with local journalists and media practitioners as a means of addressing culturally-justified violence against women;
- conducting a 4-day workshop on Sexuality, bringing together over 20 activists from the Africa and Middle East in Rabat, Morocco, as trainers and participants;
- arranging translations of key publications on women's human rights into other languages.

In June, the Strategic Task Force and each of the three Working Groups held our first face-to-face strategizing meetings held in Dakar, Senegal and London, UK.

It is with great excitement and enthusiasm that we look ahead to the coming years of the WRRRC Programme.

EDITORIAL & SOLIDARITY

In this issue we are delighted to welcome the launch of the programme “Women reclaiming and re-defining cultures: Asserting rights over body, self, and public spaces” a joint venture between WLUML and the Institute of Women’s Empowerment (IWE), which will bring together women from the Muslim world to examine and discuss how systems of culture, tradition and religion, are used as instruments to legitimise their oppression.

The current debates around the veil as a feminine symbol of Muslim identity or around dress codes are examples of these systems at work. The hushed controversy between the US President Barack Obama and the French President Nicolas Sarkozy is symptomatic. On 4 June 2009, Obama stated before the Egyptian Parliament that the “United States government has gone to court to protect the right of women and girls to wear the hijab and to punish those who would deny it”. Two days afterwards, while on an official visit to France, Mr. Obama urged his counterpart to lift the ban on the veil in public schools. Mr. Sarkozy retorted: “The full face veil is a sign of women’s subjugation”. A parliamentary commission composed of diverse political parties has been established in order to investigate the wearing of the full face veil in France, and to prepare repressive measures in line with other European countries.

Such a debate is disturbing on more than one level since the true question is: “Why should women wear the veil in order for their Muslim identity to be recognized?” rather than “Why should it be banned?” Further to the problematic issue of the veil, is that of clothes in general for women. In Sudan, women activists have been taken to court for wearing trousers in public, and threatened with a public flogging. Similarly, in Nigeria, the Federal State is trying to legislate against any (women’s) clothes that it considers indecent; and, in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, restrictive dress codes have been enforced, affecting not only women but also sexual minorities. The forthcoming book by Ayesha Salma Kariapper on Muslim women’s dress in the United Kingdom presents interesting perspectives on the analysis of the situation in this country.

However, it is as difficult to accept the compulsory wearing of the veil for religious and cultural reasons as it is to accept a ban by law, because both impulses are a product of the control over women’s body by the State, religious authorities and society. Recourse to law to safeguard from religiously and culturally justified dress codes impositions is an attack on basic citizens’ rights. It is, therefore, fundamental for women and men to distance themselves from the socio-cultural constraints of previous societies to focus on new debates for the 21st century.

Fatou Sow

WLUML ICO Coordinator

IRAN: Women human rights defender, Shadi Sadr, released from jail

Women Living Under Muslim Laws is very happy to announce that Shadi Sadr was released from Evin Prison, Tehran, on Tuesday 28 July 2009.

WLUML Council member, Ms. Sadr, is a human rights lawyer who especially defends the rights of women in Iran. She is also part of the Stop Stoning Forever Campaign and Meydaan (<http://meydaan.com/english>).



On Friday 17 July 2009, at around 11:30 a.m., Shadi Sadr was abducted by a group of officers in civilian clothes while she was walking on Keshavarz Boulevard, Tehran, to a mosque for Friday prayers. According to an eye-witness account, her friends tried to pull her away from her abductors but were unable to do so; Ms. Sadr was “hit badly and dragged so badly that her scarf and manteau (overcoat) was removed from her”. She was then forced into a car and taken away. Her abductors did not show any identity cards, warrants, or a reason for her apprehension. Security forces ransacked the Sadr home for several hours and in the presence of their ten-year-old daughter, taking away some papers, documents, and two computer cases that had belonged to Shadi’s husband and the child. On Sunday 19 July Security Guards called Ms. Sadr’s family asking them to provide bail. Niachian asked the guards what would be acceptable for bail and they told him to bring ID card and salary documents. However, after waiting outside Evin Prison for five hours, the family returned home without her.

Ms. Sadr has been released on bail of US \$50,000. The accusations against Ms Sadr are that she acted against national security by provoking people to act in a disorderly fashion and to disobey police orders, despite her non-violent advocacy for the human rights of women. This abduction was a targeted act, unlike other arrests of peaceful women human rights defenders in Iran such as at demonstrations.

SAUDI ARABIA: Imprisonment and Whipping of 75 year-old Woman

30/03/2009: WLUML, and its allies, demand that Saudi Arabia demonstrate its commitment to human rights and release Khamisa Sawadi, Fahd al-Anzi, and Hadiyan bin Zein and revoke the order of deportation.

Please check the WLUML website for updates at: www.wluml.org/english/news.shtml

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.

WHRD & INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY STATEMENT

Defending Women - Defending Rights.org

The International Campaign on Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) grew out of the recognition that WHRDs work tirelessly for the protection and promotion of human rights. WHRDs, however, face gender-specific risks and vulnerabilities in addition to those faced by all human rights defenders and have had little attention in the human rights arena. Women human rights defenders, as defined by the Coalition, encompass both women active in human rights defence who are targeted for who they are as well as all those active in the defence of women's rights who are targeted for what they do. Simply, the term pertains to human rights activists who are women, as well as other activists including those who defend the rights of women and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people; and uphold the universality of rights. The initiative was founded upon the following four pillars: to call for the recognition of women human rights defenders; to highlight violence committed by the state and its agents; to identify human rights violations perpetrated by non-state actors such as fundamentalist political groups, the family and community; and to expose the issue of sexuality in relation to abuses faced by women human rights defenders.

In her 2002 report before the UN Commission on Human Rights, Ms. Hina Jilani, former UN Special Representative of the Secretary General on Human Rights Defenders addressed the critical situation of women human rights defenders. The significance of gender in protecting and supporting WHRDs is also built into the mandate of the current UN Special Representative on Human Rights Defenders, Ms. Margaret Sekaggya, with whom the WHRD Coalition held a Strategic Meeting on 18 June 2009.

The "Women Human Rights Defenders International Coalition" was formally constituted in November 2008, and comprises various women's rights and human rights organizations and networks. Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML) sits on the Executive Committee of the WHRD Coalition, committing to: uphold the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders including the principles and practices of universality of human rights and non-violence; and to take action for the protection and support of the rights of women human rights defenders, including sustaining their activism and well-being.

The WHRD Coalition released a joint statement on the occasion of International Women's Day on 8 March 2009, declaring that:

Women human rights defenders around the world, "challenge structures of discrimination and oppression that create environments

conducive to human rights abuse. In the context of the current economic recession, women human rights defenders' access to defence and protection is affected by shrinking resources and makes the nature and range of the attacks against them ever more severe. [...]

[W]e note with great concern the statements of some countries which attempt to undermine existing commitments to accepted international human rights standards, in particular, non-discrimination based on gender and sexual orientation, that threaten the human rights of women human rights defenders including lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people.

We also stress the importance of the work done by women human rights defenders to document, monitor and provide protection for those under attack for their religion or belief as well as for exercising their right to freedom of expression. We hold these two rights to be inter-dependent and mutually reinforcing and note that attempts to limit them on grounds of 'defamation of religion' will undermine existing standards, and hinder the work of defenders by legitimising targeted attacks on them. [...]



The work of the WHRD Coalition continues, with a Strategic Conversation on "Addressing Gaps in the Defense of Women Human Rights Defenders" in June 2009 and the development of a manual on documenting violations against WHRDs.

Insite, Resiste, Persiste, Existe: Women's Human Rights Defenders' Security Strategies
By Jane Barry and Vahida Nainar, (2008: Urgent Action Fund, Kvinna Till Kvinna & Frontline), 96 pp.

This publication brings us the voices of women human rights defenders (WHRDs) from all over the world. Each woman speaks from her personal experience of combating violence and discrimination in complex contexts – in situations of overt or hidden conflict, organized armed violence as well as rising fundamentalisms. It also introduces the concept of 'integrated security' – coined by Colombian activists and echoed by other WHRDs across the world: a concept that challenges us all to redefine the militarized, disconnected concept of 'security' and recognize that integrated security is about feeling safe in all aspects of our lives – from our ability to feed our families to speaking freely about our governments.

You can download the full statement at:
<http://tiny.cc/weW01>

Some WHRD Members:
Information Monitor (Inform), Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML), World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID), Baobab for Women's Human Rights, Human Rights First, International Federation of Human Rights (FIDH), MADRE (an international women's human rights organisation).

You can find out more about the WHRD Coalition on their website:
www.defendingwomen-defendingrights.org/

and download *Claiming Rights, Claiming Justice: A Guidebook on Women Human Rights Defenders* here: <http://tiny.cc/ULVvg>

"All over the world, women defend the rights of individuals and communities facing oppression, discrimination and violence. Their work is powerful, and controversial. And it often meets with bitter, and violent, opposition."

(excerpt from *Insite, Persiste, Resiste, Existe*)

Available at:
<http://tiny.cc/X2nZB>



WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AND ACTIVISM

Protests against family laws

AFGHANISTAN: In April 2009, more than 300 Afghani women demonstrated in the streets of Kabul against the new Family Law signed by President Karzai. Women's activists in neighbouring Iran expressed their full support for the demonstration.



The new Family Law introduces a range of so called Taliban-like restrictions, and especially limits the rights of Shi'ite women. Approximately 20% of the Afghani population are Shi'ite Muslims. Under this new Family Law the marital age of Shi'ite girls decreases from 18 to 16; marital rape is legalized; and women are not allowed to leave the house without their husbands' permission.

The Afghani protestors, mostly women, gathered in front of one of Afghanistan's most influential Shi'ite madrasa – the School of the Last Prophet – where the scholars who drafted the Family Law are based. They held banners and placards, and they used megaphones to voice their demand for rights. However, the protestors faced an even larger counter demonstration: men and women accusing them of being "whores" and demanding Islamic laws.

The Afghani women protestors did not garner support from their countrymen. The only support they received came from their neighbours, their Iranian sisters, who issued the statement *Support of Women in Afghanistan Against their New Family Law*.

"Our tormented Afghani sisters. We, the Iranian women's movement activists have been trying regularly and responsibly to follow activities, achievements and failures of women in the area. Because we believe that each achievement or failure which is faced by women specially in our region can have reciprocal effects on Iranian women and our society at large."

By Johanna Heden

Women Election Victory

KUWAIT: The historic victories of the four women candidates, Massouma Al-Mubarak, Aseel Al- Awadhi, Rola Dashti and Salwa Al-Jassar, in last month's elections are seen as a vote for change in the Gulf State. Although parliament was established in 1962, it was only in 2005 that women in Kuwait were granted political rights. Add to this the recent tensions between the ruling family-dominated Cabinet and elected MPs that led the emir, Sheikh Al-Sabah, to dissolve Kuwait's National Assembly in March, and the fact that the May 16, 2009 election was the third in as many years.

Women captured seats in the 50-member National Assembly, after two unsuccessful bids in 2006 and 2008. According to *The Kuwait Times*, only 19 of the registered 282 candidates were women, down from the 28 who registered last year and 31 in 2006.

In the election build-up, some members of Kuwait's Islamic Salafi political party had called for a boycott of women candidates. Women candidates were not deterred, however; Aseel al-Awadhi, a university professor of philosophy at Kuwait University, who won a parliamentary seat, said it was time that women had a role in politics in general. Furthermore, the strength of Islamist MPs has been eroded: Sunni Islamists and their tribal allies now have 11 seats in parliament, down from 21.

"The women's success reflects the Islamists' poor performance."

Mary Ann Tetreault, professor of international affairs at Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas, speaking to the Inter Press Service sought to counter the fallacy that the women MPs are all 'liberals': "They are only liberal in the sense of being open-minded, but they all have different visions, ideological perspectives, issue interests, and approaches to policy that will become more evident as they engage in parliamentary life." In fact, she added, the women's success reflects the Islamists' poor performance. "Two women MPs outpolled Islamist MPs. It is perhaps this factor that stimulated the Salafi fatwa [decree] stating women running for political office were committing a sin and that voting for a woman is a sin."

By Eleanor Kilroy

More pictures at:
www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/asia/article6098614.ece

"...we believe that each achievement or failure which is faced by women specially in our region can have reciprocal effects on Iranian women and our society at large."

Child marriage in Nigeria. Interview with Asma' u Joda

Many of us are aware of the phenomenon of child marriage, which is destroying the life opportunities, freedoms, and mental and physical well-being of young girls around the globe. Here we present an interview with WLUML networker, Asma' u Joda, about her work to eliminate child marriage in Nigeria.

Sheherazade Kara: What activities are already underway?

Asma' u Joda: In the UK, the Forum on Marriage and the Rights of Women and Girls (a network of mostly UK-based organisations that campaign against early marriage and violence against women) has come up with an advocacy tool kit after a series of international meetings. The issue of child marriage is linked to that of bride pricing in that due to high bride price trends, parents will give their young daughters away in marriage to get the cows, or other resources, needed to pay for their son's brides. The Forum attended a meeting on this problem in autumn 2005, which was hosted by the MIFUMI Project in Kampala Uganda (an international aid and development agency that supports the needs of and promotes protection for women and children affected by domestic violence and abuse, as well as bride price violations).

I run the Centre for Women and Adolescent Empowerment in Yola Adamawa State in north-east Nigeria. We have done a lot of work on stopping child marriage including going to court with girls who have been victims of child marriage. We were able to annul such marriages on the basis that the girls did not consent. We have also prevented child marriages from happening by getting community members to report them. We also use respected women leaders to talk to parents, and have had a high success rate. Girls and women are realizing that their parents and family members do not have the right to force them to marry and that they have a right to choose their husbands themselves.

S.K. What do you have planned for the coming year?

A.J. In our 2009 - 2012 Strategic Plan, even though we have recognized that we have made an impact and drastically reduced the prevalence of child marriages, we still need to continue the work and advocate the total eradication of child marriage.

The Centre, and Women In Adawama (a new women's political forum in Adamawa State), are working to ensure the adoption by the Adamawa State House of Assembly of the Gender and

Equal Opportunities Bill and the Child Rights Act, both of which deal with the issue of child marriage.

Musawah Nigeria is in the process of writing a proposal in response to a request from the Nigerian Human Rights Commission (which pushed for the adoption of the Child Rights Act in Northern Nigeria), the Federation of Muslim Women in Nigeria (FOMWAN, a religious organisation) and Women Rights Advancement Protection Agency (WRAPA, a women's rights organisation).

S.K. What results do you expect?

A.J. A bill binding all Nigerians to stop child marriage, and for the community to recognize that it isn't good for girls to be married before they are ready.

S.K. What can our networkers do to support this campaign?

A.J. Talk about it and against it. Including information dissemination on it and condemning it when it happens. A lot of networkers are already involved. The main problem we have in our advocacy to stop child marriage, is that there is very little funding available; donors feel they are interfering with "the culture and traditions of people". We need to change this mindset and show donors that girls have a right to chose, and patriarchal systems do not have a right to destroy their daughters.

S.K. Do you have anything else you would like to add?

A.J. We need to be more aggressive in convincing its funders to fund projects to stop child marriage. It is violation of the victims' rights to: life (as death is a possibility); to health (statistics show that maternal mortality is mostly of teenage mothers and VVf and AF etc); to speak for themselves (their consent is not sought); and to enjoy their life (i.e. when girls are married off their capacity to play is stopped etc).

Interview by Sheherazade Kara, WLUML networker

“Girls and women are realizing that their parents and family members do not have the right to force them to marry and that they have a right to choose their husbands themselves.”

If you want to know more about the MIFUMI Project, visit: www.mifumi.org



NEWS FROM NETWORKERS

The Danish-Arab Research Conference

On 13-15 May 2009 a conference was held by the Feminist Research Centre (FREIA) at Aalborg University in Denmark, organised in collaboration with the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW), Lebanese American University, Beirut, Lebanon. Entitled "Knowledge - Empowerment - Politics: Gender research and women's grassroots activism - The Danish-Arab Research Conference," this interdisciplinary conference aimed at presenting research on the relations between women's grassroots activism, gender research and political changes in Arab and Nordic countries. They posed the questions: "Under which circumstances are feminist movements and NGO's successful in generating legal reforms for women? Have they exchanged experiences on what works and what does not? What is the role of international organisations? What is the relation between grassroots activism, gender research and research in general?"

The conference was structured into 6 workshops:

- Histories of grassroots feminism
- Gendered aspects of national and international migration
- Religion, values, gender and grassroots activism
- Families, women's activism and gender research
- Human rights and gender relations
- Democracy, political presence and political representation.

The conference was attended by WLUML networker Amal Al-Ashtal, who presented her work on the Yemeni women's movement (further details can be found here: <http://tiny.cc/LWxJC>).

"The access of self-help networks to the international arena" meeting

On 23-25 March 2009, WLUML participated in a meeting convened by the Institut de recherche et débat sur la gouvernance/ Institute for Research and Debate on Governance (IRG) and the Ford Foundation, entitled "The access of self-help networks to the international arena: Articulating local actions and global advocacy strategies".

The meeting, held in Rambouillet, France, brought together participants from various transnational networks. In each network, one delegate worked mostly at the international level and one mostly at the grassroots level.

The participants came from networks mobilized around 4 causes or fields of action, namely:

- **Ethnic minority and indigenous movements:** International Alliance of Indigenous & Tribal People of the Tropical Forest; Indigenous Information Network (IIN);
- **Marginalized urban population:** International Alliance of Inhabitants; Shack/Slum Dwellers International; Streetnet (Alliance of International Street Trader and Hawker Organisations); Wiego (Women in Informal Employment/Global Wastepickers Network);
- **People living with HIV/Aids:** Positive Women's Network; Nepwhan (Network of People living with Aids in Nigeria); International Community of Women Living with HIV and AIDS;
- **Women working at the grass-roots:** WLUML (Women Living under Muslim Laws); GROOTS (Grassroots organizations operating together in sisterhood); WEAP (Women's Economic Agenda Project).

Instead of requesting conference papers from participants, this seminar requested short videos from participants prior to the meeting responding to a set of questions about the structures and objectives of their networks. These videos will be edited into a feature-length film. From WLUML, the meeting was attended by Samia Allalou (Algeria/France) and Aisha Lee Shaheed (Canada/Pakistan). Unfortunately the third scheduled WLUML delegate, Mahboubeh Abbasgholizadeh (Iran) was unable to attend.

"Under which circumstances are feminist movements and NGO's successful in generating legal reforms for women?"



Documentary film: “A Small Dream”

“I want the students to excel in life and to proudly claim that they once studied in Moach Goth Replication School...At times when people would taunt us in the streets saying 'she thinks she is the guardian of our community's wellbeing...' I would pray in my heart - give me no home, but grant my children a good school; grant me only this that in comparing [my home and the school], people see my sincerity and years of toil; and recognize that I have not worked for myself, but only for this small dream...”

I encountered a very interesting phenomenon in the Moach Goth community. Moach Goth's inhabitants are a mixture of people from the remote areas of Balochistan, Sindh, NWFP (North-West Frontier Province), as well as Afghan migrants who have their own so-called cultural norms. Most of the women living there are keen to educate their daughters because they think education is a mean of empowerment and they don't want them to suffer in the life as they did, while the men are still resistant to the idea of girls' education. As part of the next generation Humaira Bachal, now a young woman of 20 years, and her team of adolescent teachers and students are fighting to bring change with their dedication, commitment and resistance to injustices.

Humaira sat on the naked floor of her home, which has no doors or windows, with only a roof covering her head, telling me her story. I saw in her eyes, which were so clear, committed and full of faith in what she has been doing since she was just ten years old, that there was a film to be made.

As the film maker, this story is not just one of development for me, but of resistance against the System, Culture and Class; the system that is always in favor of the people who already have power and resources, culture which has been used to discriminate against people on the grounds of gender, race and color, and class which has been consciously maintained by the system.

As a first grade student, Humaira was the only one to go to school while all her friends played in the streets. She used to think school was a punishment, but soon came to believe that she was the privileged one. She remained troubled by this until, still only in fifth grade, she thought how she might redress this injustice: she would teach children at home the lessons she had learnt in class. Roping in her younger sister, Tahira, Humaira begged students to donate the unused pages of their old notebooks and pencil stubs, and started teaching her friends every day after school.

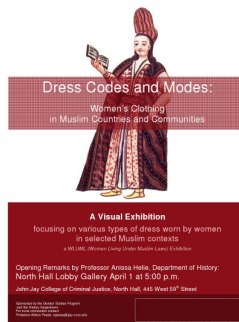
I remained curious about who was the support and role model for Humaira until I met Zainab Bibi, Humaira's mother, who endured social ostracisation, verbal and even physical abuse by the immediate and extended family in her determination to give her daughters an education.

I found Humaira to be an indigenous feminist, a grassroots' women's rights activist and representative of women in Pakistan who are not only aware of their problems and gender discrimination, but are ready to struggle, having developed their own form of resistance against an injustice in their society in the name of culture, religion and tradition.

By Gulnar Tabassum

You can watch the film here:
<http://r4d.blip.tv/file/2116878>

WLUML Dress Codes & Modes Exhibition in New York



In April 2009, John Jay College of Criminal Justice hosted WLUML's Dress Codes and Modes Exhibition. This exhibition explores the diversities and commonalities in women's dress through space and time, and highlights

the influence of a variety of factors – such as class, status, region, work, religious interpretation, ethnicity, urban/rural, politics, fashion, climate etc. Dr. Anissa Hélie, professor in the history department at John Jay College and a WLUML Council member, introduced the exhibition.



© Allison Pease

Dr. Anissa Hélie, Professor at the Department of History at John Jay College and a WLUML Council member, holding an introductory talk.

The exhibition received very positive responses. Many students, while staring curiously at the exhibition panels, described it as “very imaginative and powerful”.

By Johanna Heden



Religion, Culture and Politics: Isn't My Body Mine?

“Control over women's bodies has become a political project.”

In this short piece I will discuss the complex relationship between religion, culture, politics, and women's position within society; their body and health.

Over the past thirty-four years, women have primarily focused on their position within the family, sexual and reproductive health and rights, access to education, training and employment as the basis of their economic empowerment, and political rights as citizen. These issues are especially contentious in contexts where religion, culture and politics are in conflict or collude. In what follows, I will discuss two factors that have had an immense impact on women's health issues and discourses: “the deleterious impacts of global capitalism and macroeconomic restructuring on poverty levels and health, and the rise of explicitly antifeminist, fundamentalist politico-religious forces.” (R. Petchesky 2003)

“Secularism is a key issue in debates on democracy, and is both praised and contested as a basic principle of modernity.”

Women's health is a human development issue

It is not only regular poverty, inadequate economic growth, lack or poor quality of facilities, and environmental degradation that are having adverse affects on women's needs and rights (Madunagu 2006), but also 'organized poverty' – i.e. globalisation processes “targeted at improving macroeconomic management or increasing gross national product growth while ignoring or worsening the incomes and livelihoods of the majority” (Sen 1994). But, as many politicians promise to institute minute reforms, establishing the occasional countryside clinic and distributing the occasional vaccine is certainly not enough to promote women's sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Why is the issue of religion still so important today?

It is undeniable that religion has a stake in politics. Even when religions are formally relegated to the private sphere – as is the case in most European countries - they have never been absent from politics. There has been a noticeable upsurge, the world over, of radical religious groups whose goal is to transform society along religious 'norms'. Furthermore, 'culture' is also used as a tool to reshape relations and the social contract between the State and its citizens (especially women) – e.g. imposition of “appropriate” attire and codes of conduct in the public/private sphere. Control over women's bodies has become a political project.

Family laws

Muslim populations, irrespective of religiosity,

have always insisted on managing men/women relations within the family according to Islamic principles. The majority of political leaders in Muslim countries continue to elaborate and revise family code based on their interpretation of Shari'a. Family laws are at the centre of political controversies between religious groups and women's organisations. Furthermore, international resolutions and declarations, aimed at reducing discrimination, have been continually contested by many 'ordinary' people and fundamentalist groups.

So how do we get beyond these positions? A few words on secularism

The notion of secularism questions the nature of the relationship between political and religious authority. But, is secularism only the separation between state and religion? The answer is decidedly no. There are many conceptions of secularism, as understandings vary significantly according to protagonists, contexts and issues. Secularism is a key issue in debates on democracy, and is both praised and contested as a basic principle of modernity.

There is much criticism of Islam as being incompatible with secularism. The rise of religious fundamentalism encourages the hostility of Muslim communities towards the contemporary secularist message (Bencheikh 2005). Confronted with these arguments, Tariq Ramadan proposes a reform of Islam in order for it to become a force of transformation in the world (2006). But here is the debate about reforming Islam ? Certainly not for the making of the law.

It is clear that a human rights approach is crucial for global citizens, and women need to be involved in policy decisions over their bodies. Patriarchal systems can no longer continue to preside over women's body and health. Although most states have signed and ratified international human rights resolutions, it is difficult to enforce most international documents and bring gender justice into the law because of the opposition of Parliamentarians and societies, as has been demonstrated by recent events in diverse parts of the Muslim world. It is also necessary to deconstruct the relationship between religion, culture and politics in the development of laws that impact upon women's bodies and health.

By Fatou Sow

Abstract from a keynote speech presented at the conference on “Gender, Islam and Health in Africa”, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (USA), 16-18 April 2009.

“It is also necessary to deconstruct the relationship between religion, culture and politics in the development of laws that impact upon women's bodies and health.”



The Testimony Project

On 23 July 2009, "The Testimony Project" was launched at Amnesty International's UK headquarters in London, and in attendance were two staff from the WLUML International Coordination Office (ICO). The event brought together individuals and organizations from all over the country to give voice to and listen to the stories of women seeking asylum in the United Kingdom, with the objective of building a network to support them.

Bella, Marjorie and Farhat are three women who delivered testimonies to their own experiences as asylum seekers. Their stories, in common with hundreds of people in similar circumstances, are tales of violence, deprivation, humiliation and isolation, and their voices refuse to be silenced. Bella and Marjorie left Uganda to escape political persecution, while Farhat left Pakistan with her children after suffering domestic violence. The physical and psychological tortures they suffered in their home countries did not guarantee them compassionate treatment here in the United Kingdom; in fact they were subjected to further injustice and discrimination on their arrival in the country.

LEND YOUR VOICE

You are cordially invited to the launch of The Testimony Project. The Testimony Project is dedicated to giving voice to those whose stories would otherwise not be heard - refugee women seeking asylum in the United Kingdom.

Launch speakers will include: **Monica Ali** (author of *Brick Lane*), **Jon Snow** (broadcaster and presenter of *Channel 4 News*), **Helen Bamber OBE** (co-founding director of the Helen Bamber Foundation), **Debora Singer** (Chairman of the Refugee Women's Resource Project at Asylum Aid), **Jeremy Corbyn MP** and three women at different stages of the asylum seeking process.

The event will feature the films and oral accounts of women brutalized by the asylum process, and will be followed by a press conference, and drinks.

Giving testimony is giving voice; yet all too often the voices that should be heard are silenced and those who want to speak out are ignored. Please hear their voice. Please lend your own.

Your presence - and your support - will make a huge difference.

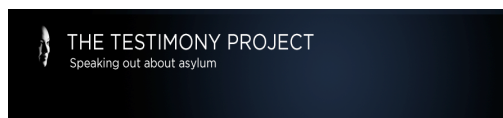
Thursday 23rd July 2009, at 6pm
Amnesty International UK, 17-25 New Inn Yard, London EC2A 3EA
Places are strictly limited, so please RSVP by Friday 10th July to admin@testimonyproject.org or call +44 (0) 7989 540 704

www.testimonyproject.org

THE TESTIMONY PROJECT
Speaking out about asylum

Other speakers lent their voices to the Testimony Project, among whom were: Monica Ali, writer and author of *Brick Lane*, who talked about the importance of telling a credible story; and Jon Snow, broadcaster and presenter of Channel 4 News, who encouraged everyone to use the internet and social networks to raise awareness among people of what is happening every day all over the world.

In particular, Debora Singer who is champion of the Refugee Women's Resource Project at Asylum Aid, explored the reasons why women asylum seekers generally face more discriminations than men. She underlined the scant consideration of issues that affect women, (i.e. FGMs, honour crimes, forced marriages, domestic violence), at the time when the United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees was written, and the lack of understanding of women's rights and needs in



the UK Border Agency and the Asylum and Immigration Tribunal (AIT). Also, the MP Jeremy Corbyn added his voice, criticising the 'tick the box mentality' and inhumanity of the UK asylum process. Other speakers were Helen Bamber OBE, co-founding director of the Helen Bamber Foundation, and Chris Leave, storyteller, who reminded the audience through his reading of the story of a child asylum seeker that "the story means that the storyteller is alive".

In fact, The Testimony Project aims at "giving voice to those who would otherwise not be heard", especially women asylum seekers and refugees as they are the most vulnerable ones, and wants to empower them providing that useful information and essential expertise (at this purpose see the Charter of rights of women seeking asylum which many other organisations have also endorsed). An actual community of people made of individuals and organizations is behind the website, which will contribute to create and widen a safe space where to share experiences, get support and receive legal advice.

By Chiara Maurilio

If you want to learn more about the Testimony Project, visit: www.testimonyproject.org.uk/

"The story means that the storyteller is alive"

If you want to read the Charter, see which organisations have endorsed, and be part of it, please go to: www.asylumaid.org.uk

A Muslim Feminist: An Exploration of Multiple Identities

Neng Dara Affiah identifies as a Muslim feminist, is a commissioner with the National Commission on Violence Against Women, and is a vocal advocate of women's rights in Indonesia. She attended WLUML's Third Feminism in the Muslim World Leadership Institute in Malaysia, in 2007.

We are pleased to announce that her memoirs have now been published:

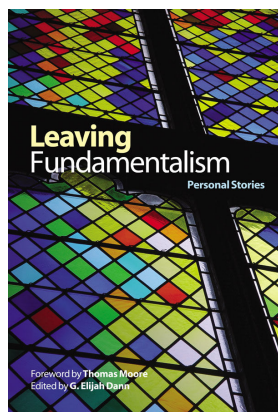
Muslimah Feminis: Penjelajahan Multi Identitas (A Muslim Feminist: An Exploration of Multiple Identities).

If you want to read more visit: www.commongroundnews.org/article.php?id=25700&lan=en&sid=1&sp=0&isNew=1



REVIEWS

Book



“A rare and human perspective on the factors that attract people to – and repel them from – fundamentalisms”

Leaving Fundamentalism: Personal Stories

Foreword by Thomas Moore, edited by G. Elijah Dann. (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2008)

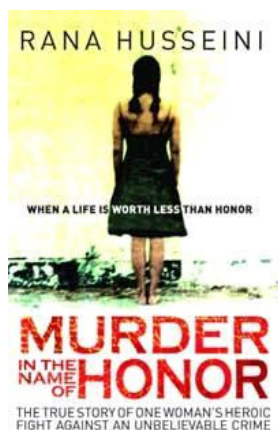
Fundamentalist movements are a hallmark of the modern political landscape, with groups using the discourses of ‘religion’ and ‘culture’ to make claims on what is authentic, acceptable, prohibited and prioritized. The chapters in *Leaving Fundamentalism* provide a unique glimpse into the lives and thoughts of people who have been involved in fundamentalist groups, in this case, those broadly related to Christianity. The title is a move at reclaiming the term ‘fundamentalism’ to refer to “conservative Protestant churches in the United States and Canada”, based on the expression of conservative Christian theology in the series of booklets entitled *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth* between 1910 and 1915. The essential tenets spelled out in *The Fundamentals* were namely: “Inerrancy of the Scriptures; the virgin birth of Jesus; the deity of Jesus; the doctrine of substitutionary atonement through God’s grace and human faith; the bodily resurrection of Jesus; and the miracles of the Scriptures.”

In “Looking Back at Sodom: My Evangelical and Lesbian Testimonies,” Julie Rak describes her fifteen years in evangelical churches having abandoned her previous life and lesbian identity. The churches demanded she marry an evangelical man, a dictate she followed, resulting in a ten-year heterosexual marriage and the repression of her sexual orientation. Eventually, her ‘second conversion’ came when Rak realized that her spiritual longing had been for a community of women, not necessarily a community of church women.

This collection weaves together accounts and memoirs of individuals, told in the first person, with equal measures of passion, anger, hope and forgiveness. Ranging from people brought unwittingly into evangelical Christian communities to former religious leaders, the essays give a rare and human perspective on the factors that attract people to – and repel them from – fundamentalisms.

By Aisha Shaheed

Book



Murder in the name of Honour. The true story of one woman’s heroic fight against an unbelievable crime.

By Rana Hussein. Foreword by Jane Fonda. (One World Publications, 2009)

“She was raped by Mohammad, her brother”. “Why was she punished and not her brother?”, “Do you think we killed the wrong person?”, “Relax. We did the right thing. [...] She tarnished the family’s honour and deserved to die”. A pattern emerges and questions arise: How can a person ‘deserve’ to die? How can a murder be justified? How can a murder committed in the name of *honour* ever be legitimized?

Rana Hussein is a young investigative reporter for the ‘Jordanian Times’, and the recipient of the Human Rights Watch Award (2000), among other prestigious awards. In her book, she recounts the journey she undertook to break the silence around ‘honour’ killings in Jordan in the early 1990s, starting a national campaign to reform related laws, and laying the foundation for simultaneous international campaigns against VAW.

Personal accounts give a vivid insight into the reality of ‘honour’ killings and bear witness to the devastating effects of legal systems which permit and justify such crimes. The initial focus on Jordan is expanded to other countries and to migrant communities in Europe and North America, as well as the most recent case of an

attempted ‘honour’ killing in Italy, where more precise and updated legal information would have been appreciated. This wider perspective helps the reader to understand that ‘honour’ killings find no legitimacy in religion, and tries to undermine notions of ‘cultural relativism’ which tend to justify these crimes in western societies. Indeed, a common pattern is revealed throughout the stories of Kifaya, Duaa, Allak, Fadime, Bruna, and Tina, showing the extent to which societal pressures play a major role in Jordan, Iraq, Turkey, as well as in Sweden, Italy and United States, deciding if a person deserves to die. Family ‘honour’ is the honour of the wider community and an absurd ideal which blinkers minds and hardens people’s hearts.

Murder in the name of Honour is an interesting read even for those who have no background in the topic. The book is challenging because it sheds light on the unknown side of these crimes, and demands specific changes in both laws and mentality, holding out hope for the reform of national and international laws and for more humane societies.

By Chiara Maurilio

The Moon in the Water

By Ameena Hussein. (Perera Hussein Publishing House, Sri Lanka, 2009)

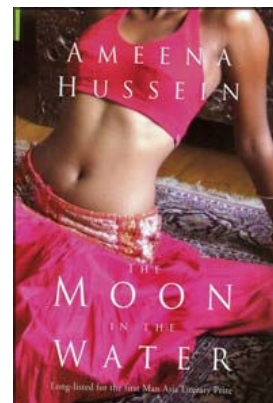
Sri Lankan-born Hussein's first novel is a compelling tale of the search for one's roots and identity, beyond shared memories and transcending ethnic and gender divisions. *The Moon's* female protagonist, Khadeeja – young, beautiful, successful in her career in Geneva and engaged to be married to a Malawian, Abdullah – returns home to Sri Lanka after her beloved father is accidentally killed in a bomb blast. Reunited with her grieving mother and siblings, she is shocked out of her mourning with the revelation that she was adopted as a baby and has a younger brother, Arjuna, now estranged from his adoptive family and living on a once majestic country tea estate. Khadeeja's journey into her past forces her to confront a landscape and people scarred by decades of civil conflict, where perceived disloyalty to a cause or armed group can be punishable by death.

There are moments when Hussein forgets she is a novelist and uses the novel's characters as mouthpieces for her generation's frustration with the short-term thinking of aid organizations and the patronizing attitude of naïve 'foreigners'.

Worst still she introduces marginal characters simply for the purpose of expounding upon, for example, the influence of *wahabist* thought and practices in Sri Lanka. Thus one of the principal characters, Abdullah's, encounter with a provincial Imam leads to a lengthy account of the latter's past: "And so Shahul Hameed was sent to a madrasah in Pakistan. [...] He disagreed with the whole system that prevailed there – the unquestioning rote, the rigid hierarchy, the intolerance. This cannot be Islam he would retort and each time he queried the system he would be beaten."

The novel's suggestion that Arjuna's difficult childhood and transgressive adulthood foreshadows a tragic destiny is all too predictable; the horrific natural disaster of the Tsunami becomes little more than a plot device, and the catalyst for Khadeeja's reassessment of her own loyalties and priorities. This seems like laziness of the part of an author who otherwise writes passionately about the people and history of her country.

By Eleanor Kilroy



Book

Women's Side of War (Ženska strana rata)

Edited by Lina Vušković and Zorica Trifunović. (Women in Black - Belgrade, 2008)

Women's Side of War is an anthology of personal experiences of women in former Yugoslavia, between 1991 and 1999, that show their strength in the face of war and in opposition to "men's-only history, dry and mercilessly impersonal".

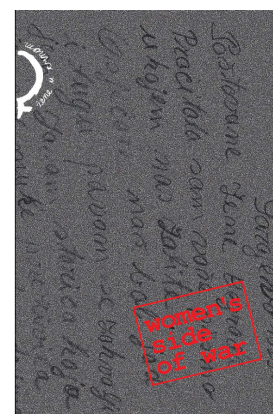
The book is divided by theme, grouping accounts of violence, loss, friendship and politics; the myriad narratives provide for layers which weave a powerful historical account of pain, love and survival in the face of nationalism and ethnic conflict. The occasionally flawed translations can be overlooked, although one translator does insist on a peculiar use of English colloquialisms which distracts from the narrative.

Although the accounts are often brutal and the descriptions of the physical traumas of conflict are nauseatingly frank, they are interspersed with beautiful tales of friendship and family.

Each account is relatively short, so individually they make for a quick read. The introduction takes the form of a letter which is written to women readers, yet the book is neither exclusively about nor for women.

I would encourage both men and women to pick up this book, even if it is just to open it at random pages and reflect on the memories here and there.

By Shehrezade Kara



Book

“Always disobedient to patriarchy, war, nationalism, and militarism....”

You can find more information about Women in Black—Belgrade (Žene u crnom—Beograd) and their publications at: www.zeneucrnorn.org/



REVIEWS

Film



Number One

Dir. Zakia Tahiri, Morocco, 2008

“An entertaining and original film on the subject of entrenched notions of gender roles in North Africa, and the Arab world as a whole”

“Five years after the 2004 family code reform, Moroccans are still debating the identity of the Moroccan family”, writes the director of *Number One*. Seen from the perspective of the male, middle-class protagonist, a manager of a clothing factory that employs female staff, the Moudawana is not just a piece of legislation but a living bogey ‘woman’ stalking the streets of Morocco, making men fear not only for their marriages and jobs but for the sanctity of male-only spaces. One comic scene has the manager hallucinating that the cafes are full of raucous, butch women, and hanging out the laundry on balconies are men in house-coats, while leering women in boiler suits drill the roads.

The plot is linear and easy to follow: a shy, young housewife dreams of a cosmopolitan life while her gruff husband – the factory manager – treats both her and his staff with rudeness and inflexibility, anxious that he not be taken for a fool. In fact the only person who treats him like a fool is the corpulent owner of the factory who conducts business calls from his poolside, shouting threats down the phone if the manager so much as raises the issue of ethical work practices in light of new laws, and so on. One day the wife is treated to a confidence by another mother at the school gate: her husband’s sexual appetite has become insatiable following the spiking of his food with a magic potion. The wife immediately procures

the same potion and her life is turned upside down, with unexpected advantages for the female staff of the factory, and for gender relations in the country as a whole. The manager is propelled to stardom as a role model for all newly gender-sensitised men, and having been fired for his unorthodox, women-friendly behaviour is reinstated and hailed by the factory women as their ‘Number One’ boss.

One could easily take issue with a number of the narrative devices: does not resorting to magic-realism undermine the message that a voluntary change of attitude by men is required for patriarchal societies to reform, rather than through the manipulations of their desperate wives? Then ending on a scene where the male protagonist is revered as a sort of god, rewarded for good behaviour that is assumed in women, while his wife looks on beaming with pride, perhaps reinforces the idea that women want to be treated better by men in positions of power, rather than assume those positions. The comic aspect of men doing ‘women’s work’, such as hanging out undergarments is milked to a ridiculous degree, but it remains an entertaining and original film on the subject of entrenched notions of gender roles in North Africa, and the Arab world as a whole.

By Eleanor Kilroy

UPCOMING EVENTS & ANNOUNCEMENTS

For further information visit
GREFELS website:
www.grefels.org

Visit the African Feminist Forum
website at:
www.africanfeministforum.org/

For more information and
updates, keep visit WLUML
website: www.wluml.org

If you want to know more about
this publication, write to:
pubs@wluml.org

The first Senegalese Feminist Forum (Dakar, Senegal, in August 2009)

The *Groupe de Recherche sur les Femmes et les Lois au Senegal (GREFELS)* that hosts the WLUML Regional Coordination office for Africa and the Middle East (RCO-AME) is organising a Senegalese Feminist Forum in Dakar, Senegal, between 7 and 9 August 2009. This event is part of a series of national forums started by the African Feminist Forum with the objective to create, for the feminists of the continent, an autonomous space for expression and action. To this end, the Forum created in 2006 a Charter of Feminist Principles for African women to which every member must adhere.

A Public Seminar and a 3-day discussion on *Knowing our Rights* (Yogyakarta, Indonesia, in August 2009)

The Indonesia’s National Commission on Violence Against Women (Komnas Perempuan) is organising a Public Seminar in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, on 15 August 2009. This event will discuss the WLUML publication *Knowing our Rights*, published in Bahasa Indonesian in 2007 by the non profit institute Semarak Cerlang Nusa - Consultancy, Research, Education for Social Transformation (SCN-CREST). A 3-day discussion, which will focus on specific chapters of the book, follows the seminar between 26 and 28 August 2009.

NEW WLUML Publication (Autumn 2009)

Women Living Under Muslim Laws is delighted to announce that a new publication will be soon published! Ayesha Salma Kariapper analyses in her book the debates around Muslim women’s dress in the United Kingdom, and the implications of such practices within a multicultural society. The study will also discuss related issues as racism, identity politics, and gender discrimination.

We would be happy to receive your comments, suggestions or feedback. Please, write to pubs@wluml.org