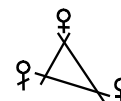


CSBR E-NEWS

Sexuality in Muslim Societies



WWHR New Ways

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WELCOME TO THE FIRST ISSUE OF CSBR E-NEWS

The Coalition for Sexual and Bodily Rights in Muslim Societies (CSBR), a bi-regional solidarity network founded in 2001, works to promote sexual, reproductive and bodily rights on the national, regional and international levels. With this E-Bulletin, we hope to share the activities and efforts of our Coalition, and provide an overview of the current issues around sexuality in Muslim societies.

2006 has been a challenging, yet exciting year. In the first half of the year, our efforts were concentrated on the United Nations, with advocacy and lobbying at the High Level Meeting on HIV/AIDS and the Commission on the Status of Women. As we were preparing for the second half of the year, the attack on Lebanon in July 2006, brought all our plans to a halt, tightening the progressive spaces we have been striving to create in the Middle East yet once again. Still, towards the end of the year, we were able to hold the landmark "Women, Sexual Right and Reproductive Rights" meeting; the first ever sexual rights conference in Tunisia.



As we share with you highlights from 2006, we are looking forward to a busy 2007. CSBR will be participating again at the CSW to advocate for the rights of the girl-children in the domain of sexuality. We will also be holding our strategic planning meeting in spring 2007. This year we will also launch an international comparative research on sexual rights advocacy in Muslim societies, through the analyses of successful reform initiatives as well as backlashes in various countries.

We hope you enjoy the first issue of CSBR E-News. In solidarity,

WWHR-New Ways

FIRST SEXUAL RIGHTS MEETING HELD IN TUNISIA

The international conference "Women, Sexual Rights and Reproductive Rights: Gains, freedoms and resistances" was held in Tunis, Tunisia between 17-19 November, 2006. The meeting, organized by the Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates (ATFD), Tunisia, and Women for Women's Human Rights (WWHR) – New Ways, Turkey, was the first ever meeting on sexual rights in Tunisia.

The meeting was organized and held under very constraining circumstances due to the immense state and police pressure and oppression in Tunisia, where no independent NGO had been allowed to organize a meeting for the past three years. ATFD was not able to confirm a venue for the meeting until only a few days before, since most hotels refused to provide a meeting space. Until the very last minute, we were expecting the police, who had the meeting venue under surveillance, to avert the meeting. Participants from Egypt and Jordan were refused visas, while a participant from Palestine was subject to Israeli police harassment at the airport and could not come. Despite all these obstacles, "Women, Sexual Rights and Reproductive Rights" was both a landmark for bringing issues of sexuality and sexual rights on the public agenda in Tunisia for the first time, and also a manifestation of ATFD's determined efforts to promote rights and freedoms despite the trying circumstances.

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Rights - New Ways

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SEXUAL RIGHTS MEETING IN TUNISIA

Continued from Page 1...

The conference drew wide interest with over 100 participants from women's and human rights groups, international agencies and NGOs and the media. The meeting started out with presentations from ATFD and WWHR-New Ways to draw the framework of the meeting including an analysis and identification of sexual rights, the global and regional contexts, the rights based approach to sexuality and the efforts to promote sexual, bodily and reproductive rights. The following presentations in the session focused on the Arab states' approach to sexual and reproductive rights, women's right to self determination through the issue of abortion. The discussions and debates on the first day were centered around the taboos around sexuality, the fact that the sexuality is a public and political issue rather than a private one, questions of morality being defined over women's bodies and sexuality, the taboo on women's desire and the necessity to overcome the restraints caused by the limitation of women's sexuality and sexual rights to reproduction.

The second day of the meeting included presentations and discussion on a number of different issues highlighting the national and regional contexts, analyses of demographic transitions in the region, Islam and women's bodies, trafficking, sexual rights and law reform, sexuality and marginalized groups such as sex workers, lesbians, disabled people, sexual violence, case studies of HIV/AIDS outreach work with sex workers in Egypt, medical abortion in Tunisia, war and sexual rights through examples of Lebanon and Algeria. Emerging issues and debates included the obstacles to promote sexual rights, aggravated by the increasing militarism, nationalism and conservative ideologies; and strategies to overcome such obstacles such as the need for law reform, sharing of best practices, and challenging the constructs and taboos on sexuality. There was extensive discussion on marginalized groups, in particular sex workers and lesbians, distinction between sexual and reproductive rights, and the need to speak freely about sexuality.



Workshops on sexuality education, strategies to promote sexual rights, and advocacy and lobbying were held on the final day of the meeting. The priorities expressed in the concluding plenary session included: the need for an alternative sexuality education -both formal and informal- not limiting women's sexuality to biology and reproduction with a rights based approach; the need to adopt a multi pronged approach to try to promote sexual rights in the legal, public and social spheres combining advocacy, public awareness raising, and political discussions on the issue; the need for information and knowledge, as well as building and sustaining solidarity and collaboration efforts; and the urgent need for law reform on issues relating to sexuality, and in particular joining forces to push for penal code reforms. Another significant emerging need from the concluding session was the necessity to create open spaces like this meeting on the national level to enable progressive and empowering debates on sexuality and to promote sexual rights.

INTERVIEW WITH AHLEM BELHADJ, CO-FOUNDER OF ATFD

A meeting on sexuality was held in Tunisia. What is the significance of this?

This conference means a breaking of the silence. Yes, for the first time, we were able to discuss sexuality freely. It was a first for even Tunisian feminists, who were able to discuss sexuality openly for the first time. Even ATFD, who has been involved in sexuality work and has had many internal discussions, found such an open and public environment to discuss sexuality for the first time. The fact that there was international participation was very enriching as well. Seeing the communalities and differences, makes one take a more holistic perspective.

Why sexuality?

We work on sexuality in Tunisia and see firsthand that many power mechanisms function through the regulation of sexuality, which is still a taboo through various constructions of what is sacred,

“Emerging issues and debates included the obstacles to promote sexual rights, aggravated by the increasing militarism, nationalism and conservative ideologies.”

shameful, decent etc. We conducted a research in Tunisia, on the major problems women face. 90% of women have problems in the domain of sexuality. A large majority of them can't have an orgasm. There are those subject to violence, outcast, those robbed of their freedom and who have to suppress themselves. Women asked us to prioritize this issue first. And then there are youth... They really need to discuss sexuality. Because they are stuck between the changing life styles and social values, they are confused. This is why the young women in ATFD worked so hard for this conference. At the same time, the rising of a new global neo-conservatism and religious ideologies force us to urgently advocate for sexual rights.

Have you had difficulties organizing this conference?

How could we have not? Of course we did. No NGO has been allowed to hold a public event in Tunisia for three years. We are under great pressure in general. Of course since our country puts on a show of secularism and modernity, it does not always use oppression overtly. Instead it only reverts to not giving permission, leaving no room to act, keeping us under surveillance, pressuring us... I say "only", but this is why not a single leaf has stirred in Tunisia for the past three years. But we were determined. We would move the leaves, the branches. And we'd do this on the issue of sexuality. We struggled for a very long time, met with the Women's Ministry, public agencies who claim to work on women's issues, and tried to collaborate with them to the extent possible. We are a women's organization that works on sexual violence and a counseling center women come to all the time. By insisting that we need to develop ourselves, that we do a lot of valuable work, we made it impossible for them to refuse us. Finally we announced that we wanted to organize a conference. First they told us they would provide us with the space, but they backed out at the very last minute. We could not find a single meeting space at the city center. Nobody would provide a venue for a conference, seminar, or panel. Finally we were able to find a touristic hotel outside the city. We resolved the issue of funding together with our co-organizer WWHR-New Ways. Until the very last minute before the meeting, we were all thinking "it will be cancelled at the last minute." We thought they would barricade the entrance like they did a year ago with the Mediko meeting. The tension increased when we learned that the government had refused our Egyptian and Jordanian participants visas and they could not come. And our Palestinian friend could not make it due to harassment from the Israeli police. These are the conditions under which we held our meeting. And we succeeded! Participation was great despite the fact that we had to have it outside the city.

Which issues were discussed? What were the outcomes?

The issue of sexuality in general was still blurred. We needed discussion and definitions. There are different experiences and perspectives due to historical and social processes. We tried to combine feminist and human rights perspectives and I think we took a step forward in this. The obstacles in social, cultural, and legal domains were also explored in the meeting, and we developed common goals. Sexuality which is often linked to reproduction and the family, was explored as a right and a space of pleasure. This is very significant. We discussed those who face particular problems due to their position in the social hierarchy. Sex work was discussed very openly and intensely for the first time. But the biggest progress was made on the issue of sexual orientation. I think this was the first discussion on the existence and invisibility of lesbian women in Tunisia. What is even more important is that we initiated a debate in Tunisia on sexuality. We've opened a gate. We don't have all the answers yet, but so many questions are out in the open for the very first time... As we are seeking the own answers more roads will open up.

What was the role of international solidarity as you were organizing this meeting?

We found the courage to organize a meeting on sexuality because of international solidarity. ATFD is one of the founders and active members of the Coalition for Sexual and Bodily Rights in Muslim Societies. As NGOs from Lebanon, Palestine, Algeria, Jordan and many more countries, we have a strong solidarity network. We discussed our idea for this meeting initially with the Coalition. We shared experiences, resources and that's how we were able to undertake this meeting. Of course the greatest support came from one of the founders of the Coalition, WWHR-New Ways, who co-organized this meeting with us. If it weren't for the solidarity of the Coalition, it would have been much more difficult for us to do this.



"Women, Sexual Rights and Reproductive Rights", Tunisia



Ahlem Belhadj, ATFD

"Sexuality which is often linked to reproduction and the family, was explored as a right and a space of pleasure. This is very significant. . . What is even more important is that we initiated a debate in Tunisia on sexuality. We've opened a gate."

You are one of the co-founders of the Coalition for Sexual and Bodily Rights in Muslim Societies. How did you decide to create such a network?

We had seen on many occasions that there are big similarities between the realities of women in Muslim societies. While all sorts of politics against women are being devised by international alliances, we can't develop our own common strategies. This is what we observed. Patriarchy works on the global scale. International powers are taking joint decisions on women's issues. We need to resist this. When we realized this need, we turned to look at one another.

How did the Coalition's efforts evolve?

We first exchanged experiences among ourselves. We realized that the more we looked at each other, the more we saw of ourselves and we grew stronger. As we got to know each other better, we started to collaborate on small scales. Then things we were doing accumulated and needed a structure. And we built this structure in Istanbul. The Istanbul meeting organized by WWHR-New Ways brought together 19 participants from various countries of the Middle East and North Africa. The decision to start a network came from that meeting. First we started a mail group, then we started to take joint actions against obstacles arising in many of our countries. And we saw that our solidarity, our foundation had grown strong. Sharing our experiences –both political and theoretical- really affected all of us struggling in our own national contexts. We all changed and became more radical with the Coalition. Our Coalition expanded to South/Southeast Asia with time, now we work as two separate networks in collaboration with one another. We can have an impact on the United Nations level, and act on the international scale. Things which once seemed so difficult to us, now feel much more easier...

This excerpt is from an interview originally published in the "Amargi Feminist Journal", Winter 2006, Issue 3, Istanbul, Turkey.

UN HIGH LEVEL MEETING ON HIV/AIDS (UNGASS), MAY 28 – JUNE 2, 2006, NEW YORK

Since 2004, CSBR has been actively partaking in UN processes, particularly pertaining to sexual, reproductive and bodily rights. The two main reasons for this are to challenge the conservative approach of most Muslim states, now strengthened by the alliance with other conservative forces like the USA and the Vatican in UN negotiations, and to render visible the efforts of activists in the region advocating for progressive social change in the domain of sexual health and rights on the international arena. To this end, in 2005, the Coalition decided to participate in the UNGASS meeting. We worked a part of the international COMPACT group advocating to prioritize sexual and reproductive rights in HIV/AIDS policy, programming and resource allocation. The delegation of the Coalition included 14 network representatives from Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Lebanon, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippines, Tunisia, and Turkey.

Blocked by the epidemic of conservatism

As expected from other recent UN meetings like Beijing +10, the negotiations were very strenuous during UNGASS. A particularly distressing development was that all Muslim countries united under OIC (Organization of Islamic Countries) and negotiated as a block, even though OIC in fact is an economic entity and has no right to speak on behalf of all Muslim countries on issues such as HIV/AIDS or women. They opposed all demands regarding the inclusion of comprehensive sexuality education, language on vulnerable groups - men having sex with men (MSM), sex workers and injecting drug users (IDU); or language on empowerment of girls in the outcome document. Egypt was the leader behind the doors and Syria, Yemen and Iraq were very vocal in the negotiations, but it was horrifying to witness the silence and complacency of all other Muslim countries who remained silent - even if they did not agree with all of this - with the excuse that "they cannot afford to anger OIC given the present political situation" - meaning the US military interventions and other conflicts

between the "West" and the "Muslim" world.

Even though we had Coalition members on government delegations, they were mostly prevented from participating in the negotiations, another new arising obstacle. In face of these developments, our delegation issued an NGO statement on behalf of CSBR, calling on our governments to change their positions and take necessary measures against the epidemic. (please see page 5 for the statement.)

Falling short of the targets

The outcome document, which was a political declaration, was adopted at the end of 3 days of intense negotiations. Our delegation, together with international civil society, lobbied extensively for the inclusion of targets, vulnerable groups, rights of women and girls, sexuality education in the outcome document. Finally, the political declaration included some positive provisions for youth, sexual health and women, yet fell short of moving forward by setting clear targets to fight the epidemic, or adopting a rights based approach against the spread of HIV/AIDS. It did not define vulnerable groups or include any provisions on sexuality education.

The High Level Meeting demonstrated yet again how challenging it was to move forward on issues of SRHR at the UN level given the prevalent conservative political atmosphere. For our delegation, all countries uniting under the umbrella of OIC constituted a further obstacle, obliterating the progressive voices from the regions. On the other hand, the split of the OAU contributed to having no concrete language on targets in the declaration, while Northern countries were reluctant to make any commitments on funding and remained silent to US opposition to language on targets, commitments, and resource allocation.

A CALL BY THE COALITION FOR SEXUAL AND BODILY RIGHTS IN MUSLIM SOCIETIES

NGO Statement issued by CSBR during UNGASS

We, non-governmental organizations and experts from 15 countries of the Middle East, North Africa and South/Southeast Asia, believe that the 2006 High Level Meeting on HIV/AIDS constitutes an occasion for reaffirming and enhancing the commitments made by our governments and the international community at the UNGASS 2001.

We strongly believe that the current position taken by some OIC countries at this meeting does not represent the civil society perspectives and best practices regarding HIV/ AIDS within our countries, as well as our commitment to the universality and indivisibility of human rights.. We as non-governmental organizations, struggle on a daily basis to provide sexual and reproductive health services, reform laws that discriminate or violate human rights, including sexual and reproductive rights, provide comprehensive sexuality education, combat violence against women, including marital rape and sexual abuse, reach out to and protect vulnerable groups and break the taboos associated with sexuality. Full realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms for all is an essential element in the global response to the pandemic.

We underline that the taboos and the politicization of issues around sexuality are major hindrances to prevention of the epidemic in our countries. The denial of the existence of youth and premarital sexuality, extra-marital sexuality, sex work and same sex practices constitutes a dangerous threat to the well-being and public health in our societies.

We are also concerned that some developed countries are failing to commit to the allocation of sufficient resources for HIV/AIDS programs and to establish measurable and time-bound Monitoring and Evaluation mechanisms.

Given the imminent threat of an outbreak of the epidemic in our countries, we call upon those countries that the OIC claims to represent:

- To adopt and implement programs and policies to ensure access to affordable and quality sexual and reproductive health services and comprehensive sexuality education for all girls and boys;
- To promote and protect sexual and reproductive rights for all;
- To adopt measures to fully empower women and girls;
- To recognize and support active participation of vulnerable groups such as sex workers and men having sex with men and injecting drug users in policy formulation and prevention programs;
- To adopt Harm Reduction programs for injecting drug users, particularly in light of the growing transmission of HIV through drug use in many Muslim-majority countries.

We urge all UN member countries to support a comprehensive, forward-looking, and ambitious political declaration, and demonstrate active leadership in bringing and combating HIV/AIDS.



“Full realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms for all is an essential element in the global response to the pandemic.”

“WOMEN, THE GIRL-CHILD AND HIV/AIDS” AT THE UN COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN

One of the resolutions tabled in 2006 for the 50th Session of the CSW was “Women, the Girl-Child and HIV/AIDS”. A CSBR delegation with members from Turkey, Egypt and Lebanon participated at the Session to lobby for strong language in the resolution, as the adoption of a sound resolution was especially important to ensure a strong lead up to UNGASS.

Our delegation lobbied intensively during the negotiations on the resolution, drafting proposals and talking points to the friendly member states, including the sponsors, and providing them with old consensus language which helped in the negotiations. The member states from the Middle East, North Africa and South/Southeast Asia mostly did not participate in the negotiations until the very end, focusing on other resolutions. However, on the day before the closing, a senior official from the mission of Egypt came together with representatives from Pakistan, Syria, Qatar and Morocco and started obstructing the negotiations. The division of labor with the Holy See was very clear and open. As a result of this attack, negotiations on the resolution lasted until the very last hour of the last day of the Commission. It was not certain whether there was going to be a resolution, since there was the possibility of one state requesting a vote on one paragraph which would encourage other states to challenge other paragraphs which could sink the whole document. The intensive lobbying efforts of SRHR advocates helped prevent this. Finally, the resolution was adopted by consensus, and co-sponsored by over 50 states, including Turkey.

Overall, the resolution on “Women, the Girl-child and HIV/AIDS” contained good aspects and innovations, which presented a step forward. The strong points of the resolution included new references to the International Guidelines on HIV/AIDS and human rights, microbicides and male and female condoms, reproductive rights, sexual education; references to ICPD, Beijing, reproductive health services, and new language on investment in research to develop female-controlled prevention methods.

ONLINE PUBLICATION: OF WAR, SIEGE, AND LEBANON

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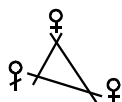
www.wwhr.org

Prepared by
WWHR - New Ways

Edited by
Liz Ercevik Amado

Design&Layout by
Sinem Goknur

E-mail: newways3@wwhr.org



WWHR New Ways

The attack on Lebanon in July 2006, yet another link in the chain of militarism and violence unleashed in the name of the “global war on terror” in the Middle East, was quick to disappear from the international public agenda. Yet as activists in the region, we were faced with the long term consequences of the so called July War and the escalating militarism: the increasing of the right wing conservative and nationalist ideologies; growing religious fundamentalisms; the tightening of progressive spaces; marginalization of our efforts.



Drawing by Abir, a 13 year old Palestinian girl

To make our response and voices heard, CSBR compiled “Of War, Siege and Lebanon”, a collective online publication of leading women activists, academicians and writers in the Middle East and South Asia. The publication, including texts by Evelyne Accad, Pinar Ilkcaracan, Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, Dina Siddiqi and Zeina Zaatari, depicts their reactions to the wars and the increasing militarism in the Middle East as well as their analysis of their impact on women activists’ efforts to promote gender equality, human rights and democracy.

Publication available at:
http://www.wwhr.org/files/2_War.pdf

Of War, Siege, and Lebanon: Women’s Voices from the Middle East and South Asia

Coalition for Sexual and Bodily Rights in Muslim Societies

September, 2006

Compiled by Women for Women’s Human Rights (WWHR) – New Ways