

Interview: Hameeda Hossain of ASK or the Ain O Salish Kendra Law and Mediation Center, Dhaka, Bangladesh

Interviewed by *Luz Maria Martinez*, Isis International Communications Program



ASK as it is known by many, is a legal resource center with the objective of creating a critical awareness of civic and human rights in a democratic society. Its' main focus is the rights of the disenfranchised, including workers, minorities, poor women and children, and main programs are legal aid to slum neighborhoods, especially to women and children. Through a counselling and mediation center they help settle disputes and negotiate with conflicting parties. ASK builds people's understanding of legal measures and laws through popular education and through human rights education. The research component of ASK is a forum that studies laws and evaluates the mechanisms of their implementation as they relate to personal rights for women, children and workers.

Q: What is your role in the center?

Hameeda: In 1986 I was one of the founders. We were confronted by the need to provide legal aid to people in poor communities. While we provided assistance to both men and women, we were finding that women were seeking our assistance in a variety of legal matters. I am responsible for the Law and Policy Reform Forum. We analyze legal amendments and legislation and define their impact on women, we then take the important aspects of the laws and translate them in ways that can be read and understood by grassroots women. The center's model is secular and multi-pluralistic. I am also responsible for networking among other organizations and the overseeing of the project. I also write a column for a daily newspaper that

aims to inform readers on laws and their impact.

Q: What are the main areas of focus of the Law and Lobbying Reform Projects?

Hameeda: The concept of the Center is not only legal aid but mobilizing people and providing active social support. We focus on women in the family, laws of equality and the change in customary laws, women as workers, and, we record the oral history of women, their struggles and resistance to inequality and for their rights.

Q: When you started the Center what were the priorities then?

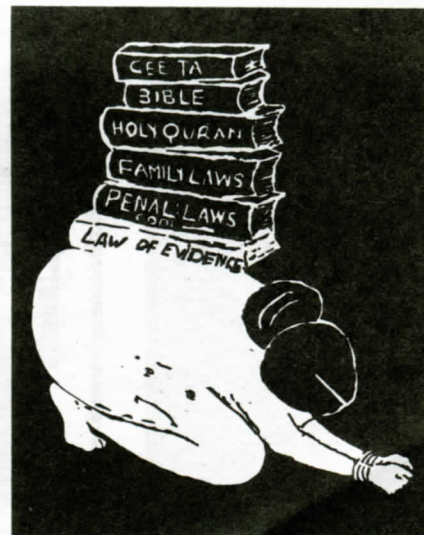
Hameeda: We began working in the slum communities on issues of eviction. As we worked with these communities we realized that there were needs for literacy, so we launched a literacy project for women. As we began to work with the women they began approaching us for advice on legal issues such as

custody problems and other legal issues.

Q: What kind of issues and mobilization projects are you undertaking now?

Hameeda: We are responding to issues that require intervention. For example, there has been a backlash by extremists focusing on women. They are attacking schools and training centers where girls and women are studying and being trained, they believe that the women's place is at home and they should not be educated.

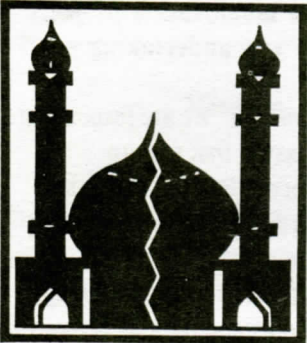
We hear of these cases and we respond in a proactive way of going into the community and providing information and education to counter balance this kind of



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reactionary behavior. The extremists have also focused on launching attacks on the NGOs, they believe that we are converting women into non-Islamic ways of life. The attacks are in particular on women's organizations.



Other current issues are intervening in communities where the village leaders are taking the law into their own hands. Such as women being charged with adultery and being stoned. We have intervened to remove the accused woman from the village.

Q: What happens to a woman when she is removed from her village?



Hameeda: We provide shelter through our network. We are looking at setting up our own shelter to provide the needed intervention for women who have to be removed immediately and given assistance. The women then settle somewhere else where they can work and not be



branded by the village. Even if the women are not physically hurt by the stoning, in such cases they are branded and outcast by the village.

Q: You are a very courageous woman, how did you become involved?

Hameeda: Originally I am from Pakistan. Because of marriage, I moved to Bangladesh 30 years ago. My husband and I were active in the independence movement, in the struggle we were

confronted with the violence against women during the war. We began to organize on this issue and provided training and setting up cooperatives. We then moved to England where I studied for my PhD. in history and then to we moved to the United States for three years before returning to Bangladesh.

Hameeda Hossain is co-publisher of the book **No Better Options**, on women in industry and has published articles in a number of journals. She is the mother of two daughters. When asked if they, too, were feminist, she responded in a matter of fact voice that yes they were. One is a practicing lawyer and the other is active in film-making and living in New York. **ASK** is a human rights and legal aid centre. Address: 26/3 Purana Paltan Line, Dhaka-1000, Bangladesh. Tel: (880) 2-835851; Fax: (880) 2-833966; Tlx: 642403 ORI BJ P.O. Box 3252. ♀



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