

*"In most of the Muslim world, patriarchal customs—rather than state law—severely limit their access to public spaces, certain occupations and information, and deny women equal access to economic resources, health facilities, judicial processes and to educational and job opportunities."*

*"...Across much of the Muslim world, the rules governing family and personal matters are said to be, or are, in fact, derived from Muslim laws. Customary practices interlock with formal laws to keep women oppressed, and either one or the other is almost inevitably labeled 'Muslim'."*

**I**n a world where patriarchy is the norm and the men dictate women's roles in society, dozens of effective ways to counter patriarchal norms, laws and systems have been evolving.

Over 100 women who participated in December 1994 in the international meeting Towards Beijing: Women Law and Status in the Muslim World, shared strategies they were using in different countries at different levels. These ranged from direct action to national lobbying, from instituting legal test cases to collective efforts for legal reforms, awareness and social change at the regional and international levels.

#### **DIRECT ACTIONS FOR CHANGE**

Direct actions require no formal organizations, infrastructure or expertise, only creativity. Men can participate too.

For example, women in Turkey challenged male monopoly of public places at night by going in groups to coffee shops not frequented by females. Their persistence, despite the men's threats, succeeded in breaking the male monopoly of night-time socializing.

Another is the wearing by women in Turkey of a purple pin to defend themselves from sexual harassment.

To pressure men to stop domestic violence against women, South American women launched massive letter campaigns addressed to the men in question and followed this with demonstrations/pickets outside their homes. In India, similar tactics have been used to encourage the community to play a positive role in reducing domestic violence.

In suburban Pakistan, a group of young men declared their refusal to marry uneducated girls, and threatened to marry city women, if there were no high school graduates in their community within five years.

#### **CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING**

Multiple methods were used to raise women's consciousness,

among them: small-group and focus-group discussions; posters, stickers, pamphlets, newsletters; press conferences; seminars, meetings; radio and television; the formal education system; alternative theater, street plays, cassettes and songs.

An important method is to lobby for and develop gender-training programs for government development workers, policy makers, researchers, media persons and the police.

Women's magazines, including government-sponsored ones, are used to expose the injustices suffered by women in the name of creating a 'just Islamic society.'

Demonstrations are also used to take the issue to the public, show women's willingness to stand up and be counted, ensure media coverage, and build a sense of solidarity among participants.

#### **LOBBYING**

Women lobby with decision-makers and the mass media regarding the portrayal of women; with state agencies on the treatment of women; with trade union leaders and political parties for their agendas on women.

Formal and informal lobbying can be held with representatives of concerned ministries and with bureaucrats.

# **C**hanging the **m**uslim **W**orld



### **MOBILIZING AND PUBLIC SUPPORT**

Face-to-face discussions, seminars, workshops, and conferences have been used to create awareness and mobilize public support. Alternative theater groups, for example, upgrade the skills of local groups to enable them to produce their own plays in their own languages.

Where public activity is illegal, women slip pamphlets into mailboxes, plaster the town with posters at night, share information by word of mouth.

### **NETWORKING FOR CHANGE**

Networking and linkages within and outside the Muslim world is a strategy used by the Women Living Under Muslim Laws to encourage women to construct their own identities. By breaking the isolation, exposing the multiplicity and diversity of women's situations and experiences, and offering support systems, networking can facilitate the reconstruction of women's identities and determine what they want their societies to be like, while not imposing any single solution or identity.

### **LEGAL REFORMS**

Legal reforms and action to prevent the enactment of antiwomen's-rights legislation have succeeded in challenging laws that discriminate against women. Among the reforms being advocated are personal status laws in Turkey, Senegal, Malaysia, Nigeria, Pakistan, Mali, Gambia, Bangladesh, Iran, South Africa, India or the Philippines.

In Turkey, for example, women successfully lobbied for changes in the right to divorce, right to abortion, and the removal of a discriminatory penalty clause allowing those guilty of raping prostitutes to be punished less.

In Iran, women launched a campaign based on Islamic texts supported by the Qur'an, for a law providing wages for housework. They argued that women, like all other Muslims, are entitled to the fruits of their labor, and that

in Islamic tradition, a woman is not required to work in her husband's home, to the extent that if she breastfeeds her child, she is entitled to payment from her husband. There, since all women work in their husband's homes, they are entitled to a salary. Religious leaders who resisted the bill were forced to concede that this was an Islamic right

centers, and do research and interventions;

- ♦ Shelters and crisis centers for women victims of domestic violence and shelterless women;
- ♦ Legal aid or rosters of helpful lawyers mobilized to provide women legal assistance and counseling;
- ♦ Solidarity work such as national women's-rights groups which



In many Muslim countries, the landscape is shifting for women.

and a law was passed in 1991 under which a man divorcing his wife must first pay her housework wages.

In Gambia and Mali, women's groups work on women's bodily rights focusing on female genital mutilation and a woman's right to control the number and spacing of her children.

### **SUPPORT SYSTEMS FOR WOMEN**

Providing women information is often not enough. When awareness leads to frustration, it can in fact be counterproductive. When mobilizing support and attempting to change attitudes, support systems must be created. While health clinics and income-generation assistance are traditional areas of women's activism, women have initiated new support systems such as:

- ♦ Resource centers that act as documentation and information

hold press conferences, facilitate linkage with lawyers or shelter groups and other groups best placed to help, lobby with concerned authorities; or international groups which write letters, faxes and telegrams to concerned authorities, publicize the issue in their own countries, etc.

### **A WOMEN'S PARLIAMENT**

There is growing recognition of the need to create a world parliament for women, a specialized forum where women's issues will receive the attention they deserve, where progress can be monitored and where women can formally file complaints of violations of their human rights.

Reference: Women Laws Initiatives in the Muslim World, Discussions from the International Meeting Towards Beijing: Women, Law and Status in the Muslim World, 11-15 December 1994, Lahore, Pakistan.