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# Small Ripples in Tanzania

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Sahiba Sisters Foundation, an activist organization foremost preoccupied with Muslim women's realities, was invited to participate in the Rights at Home Project in early 2002. Initially there was a level of apprehension about working with an institution that was primarily an academic institution, with academics who mastered theories but may not have hands on experience with complex situations on the ground. Also worrisome was the prospect of putting too much energy in empirical issues and methodological frameworks rather than on developing flexible responses to the needs of people on the ground. But the idea of working towards societal transformation using local knowledge and capacities was attractive to Sahiba. Indeed the Rights at Home approach filled a gap in local advocacy strategies since it went beyond idealistic notions of social justice and rights. Rather, Rights at Home promised to demystify and authenticate juridical positions and interpretations that were impacting the Islamic community in the area of family relations. More importantly, it resolved to do this from within Islamic laws and traditions. Muslim communities are overwhelmingly concerned that human rights arguments are substantiated by 'Islamic' texts so as to legitimize engagement or non-engagement with it.

The initial sounding board meetings with various stakeholders were held in Dar es Salaam and Zanzibar in May 2002. They aimed at unearthing issues for advocacy in Tanzania where rights issues are invariably discussed within a context of political repression and perceived or real marginalization. Most participants perceived their religion as being under attack from not only the West, but also some Muslims who have been co-opted into un-Islamic ideologies, and wanted to protect the purity and beauty of their religion.

Such suspicions did not negate the sense of appreciation for Rights at Home. Certainly, Rights at Home provided a space to air views and to critically examine the situation, something local religious gatherings fail to do. The initial meeting represented a beginning to challenging the comfort zone about what it means to be Muslim and to reflect what it means in actual practice. Additionally, the presence of a female scholar was eye rising just as was the presence of non-bearded turban-tying scholars.

Hence, already with this seemingly routine stage of the project, the waves for a rights revolution had begun to be formed and gained momentum this August with the advocacy training for some 60 advocates of change in Mwanza. Indeed, more ripples were created in Mwanza, some of which may collect into a significant mass while others may dissipate in obscurity. Either way, we cannot miss the ruffles in the landscape Mwanza created.

The training was located in a real setting, devoid of the luxuries that a four star venue would avail. In Mwanza the focus was on real people and real issues, not on impersonal rhetoric which an unfamiliar setting often emphasizes. The participation was also unique. Perhaps for the first time, different levels of human rights advocates and gatekeepers from both the government and non-governmental sector were brought together in one setting to dialogue on aspects of human rights violations and advocacy in Muslim families and communities. Moreover, non-Muslims were invited to the workshop. This is a departure from the initial approach of only involving Muslims since in reality non-Muslims are part of the social groups that may be called upon to support local initiatives aimed to promote human rights values in families and communities. In actual fact, many already do so in the legal arena providing legal aid services to Muslim women and men. Rights at Home enabled them to interact with the Muslim community on an equal basis, not only as victims. It also demystified the sharia for them. Thus, faced with increased religious tension, the training in Mwanza facilitated the beginnings of an interfaith collaboration beyond the institutional: rather it involved the personal with the professional as was evidenced in the case of Husna (see Beek Van, p. 56). And these were the minor victories, mile-

stones of sorts as Sahiba tries to bring greater visibility to the plight of Muslim women. This cannot be effectively done without challenging power dynamics not only at the family level, but also at the ideological and institutional level. In Mwanza we facilitated a process with Muslim women claiming sole responsibility in challenging power centers and power relations impacting on their status.

It is common knowledge that Islamic institutions, as religious rhetoric and space, are largely male. Women are hardly present in such forums, just as they are absent from authoritative legal sources. Thus, women lack both a voice and visibility in religious discourse and spaces. This was not to be at the training, which involved men and women in almost equal numbers. The active participation of women more than refuted claims shared by Muslim men and non-Muslims alike that Muslim women are passive spectators in community affairs and more so in issues that affect them. They dominated the discussions. Thus, here too, the relationship was being renegotiated. Muslim men who are considered authorities in religious matters no longer enjoyed exclusive right to religious discourse. They found themselves in the company of equally informed women, who in most instances showed a sharper ability to analyze and question not only the theory but also the practice, the obvious and the obscured.

Indubitably, the men were stunned by the level of participation and the challenge the women posed and it may have dawned on them that they no longer hold exclusive rights to text interpretations. Some may have even realized that the training went beyond the dicta of human rights for it challenged the values their positions and practice espoused. Necessarily this demanded a renegotiation of the benefits and privileges they enjoyed as individuals or as parts of institutions because of the continued tolerance to the status quo. This renegotiation was almost immediate. The defensive posture of some of the participants in Mwanza was to be expected as they sought to justify the status quo by hazy reference to Qur'anic injunctions which was repeatedly challenged by not only professors Muhammad Khalid Masud, Abdulkader Tayob and Abdullahi An-Na'im, but also by fellow participants who were uncompromising in excusing human rights violations on account of divine ruling without contextualizing the particular edict.

Likewise, Zainah Anwar from Sisters in Islam and Yasmin Buran Lao from Mujadillah through her lively presentation, shared their own struggles to assert themselves in their communities. Our colleague Pia also generated discussion by addressing on the array of possibilities present in doing advocacy work.

Sahiba's local network experienced some tension in renegotiating power among the membership and with the religious establishment. Unhappy with the outcome of the training, some participants from Mwanza acting with the local religious establishment decided to smear the unprecedented initiative by invoking on people a sense of guilt and fear. They accused Sahiba and her collaborators of turning the Qur'an 'upside down' and questioning the basis of Islamic reasoning and way of life. They went on to denounce those who attended the training and wanted, in particular, the women from Mwanza to publicly condemn Sahiba. But the women, no longer easily intimidated, stood firm. They refused to attribute to Sahiba or to the training what they clearly saw as political concoction. They acknowledged the empowering aspect of the training and they resolved to pull away from a body they saw as undemocratic and stagnant. Instead, they formed a new group called *Jitambue* (be aware/conscious) and intensified collaboration with local partners acquainted during the training more in tune with their vision of social justice. Indeed a social revolution is underway among women's groups in Tanzania, a revolution that is a natural consequence of revolutionary activist approaches as they are of a deep conviction in the potential of the human spirit to reclaim their dignity. The challenge for Sahiba and others is to nurture these processes to their natural conclusion.

*Salma Maoulidi is Executive Director, Sahiba Sisters Foundation. She wishes to acknowledge Ayeshah Yahya, Ayeshah Juma and Abubakar Karsan, all from Mwanza, for their input towards writing this article. E-mail: Sahiba\_Sisters@yahoo.com*