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Rights at Home Project

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Sounding Board Meetings in Yemen

The ISIM programme 'Rights at Home: An Approach to the Internalization of Human Rights in Family Relations in Islamic Communities' recently held its first series of sounding board meetings in Yemen: from 4–6 May 2002 the venue was in San'a, 9 May in Aden, and 11 May in Ta'izz. The meetings were jointly organized by the ISIM and the Forum for Civil Society (FCS), a non-governmental organization concerned with the development of democracy, human rights, and civil society, based in San'a.

The project team from the ISIM consisted of Abdullahi An-Na'im (primary consultant) and Laila al-Zwaini (coordinator). The FCS was represented by its director, Jamal Adimi, and assistant, Mohammad Asham. The team was further accompanied by two members of the Rights at Home Advisory Board, Ebrahim Moosa (Duke University, USA) and Salma Maoulidi (Sahiba Sisters Foundation, Tanzania).

The objectives of the meetings were to discuss issues and strategies regarding social and cultural rights in local constituencies in Yemen, especially regarding the autonomy of women and the socialization of children. Invited were representatives from various sectors of Yemeni society: activists, lawyers, scholars, writers, teachers and poets, as well as imams, female religious guides, judges and shaykhs. With a view to the variety of local dresses of the participants and the diversity of their contributions, it could be established that there was a well-balanced representation of various regions and backgrounds.

The overall outcomes were nevertheless quite consistent: all participants agreed that

in Yemen there exists a divergence between the *shari'a*-based laws and the Islamic *shari'a*, on the one hand, and normative behaviour which is mainly based on local and tribal customs, on the other. Such customs were said to often deprive women of their Islamic rights, for instance in matters of inheritance, marital and divorce rights, and social freedoms. This leads to the understanding that women's rights – especially in the countryside, the home of about 80% of the population – are governed by customary norms of honour and shame ('*ayb*) rather than by Islamic norms of *halal* (permissible) and *haram* (forbidden). Another practice that has an immediate impact on family life and the socialization of children is the nationwide Yemeni custom of chewing *qat* during the afternoon and evening hours, which puts a heavy strain on the already low household income and often deprives children of parental care and attention.

In such a context, norms derived from international human rights standards could be invoked to protect the rights of Yemenis' own culture and religion, and at the same time inspire a private and public debate on how these customary and religious norms could be redefined to play an accommodating and promoting role for all members of this developing society.

Activating such a debate is not an easy task, since it requires a strong political will and the application of the agreed-upon norms by well-functioning institutions, as well as a change of mentality and practice among the population as a whole. Changing only one family or community would namely not be effective or even desirable, if the rest of society is on another track and will treat the transformed individuals as outcasts.

The sounding board meetings were therefore also intended to identify so-called 'advocates of social change', local actors who enjoy authority in their respective communities and have the potential and will to effectuate – by themselves or by inspiring others – widespread cultural transformation in support of human rights. There were various candidates who easily matched these criteria: for instance, a group of *wa'izat*, female religious guides who have access to the secluded privacy of family homes; but also a female novelist specialized in folkloristic stories and songs in local dialects, which in reality have more impact on the way of thinking and behaviour of illiterate people than a religious incantation in standard Arabic.

There was also a member of parliament from the Islamists' party who is at the same time a practising lawyer, a human rights ac-

tivist and a shaykh, a tribal leader. Shaykhs in Yemen are the 'gatekeepers' of the numerous family homes located in tribal areas: without their cooperation or consent, no outsider – meaning virtually anyone from outside the tribe – can gain access to this sector of society. Although urbanized Yemenis, and many others alike, look upon tribes and tribal norms as an obstacle to progress and modernization, tribal structures have already been changing under the influence of state formation. Is it therefore illusory to imagine their positive participation in the context of civil society? Rights at Home would not shun the idea of investigating this possibility.

The enthusiastic young staff of the FCS contributed a great deal to the success of the meetings, and also gave the project members an opportunity to experience some 'grassroots-level' activities, in the form of sit-on-the-floor lunches in local restaurants and in *qat*-chewing gatherings, the latter being the inevitable décor of the afternoon sessions.

The next Rights at Home sounding board meetings and subsequent fieldwork will be held in Dar es Salaam and Zanzibar (Tanzania) from 17 June until 2 July 2002.