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WAF's Long March for Equality

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TWENTY-FIVE years ago, Fehmida and Allahbakhsh were awarded 80 lashes and death by stoning respectively by a Karachi court under the Hudood ordinances. In reaction to this savage sentence, the Women's Action Forum was born to fight against the oppression of women.

Launched by seventeen women in Karachi, WAF has grown into an amorphous, non-hierarchical umbrella body of national dimensions that brings together numerous organisations - at times over 20 in number - seeking justice for women. Regrettably, as Anis Haroon, a founder member, observed at the 25th anniversary celebration in Karachi last week, the problems they had set out to resolve in 1981 continue to haunt the women of this country even today.

Ironically, at that point in time when WAF was commemorating the two and a half decades of its existence, the government of another general in uniform was busy hobnobbing with the religious parties to decide the fate of the same ordinances that have been responsible for serious miscarriage of justice for thousands of innocent women who have suffered protracted incarceration. As we now know, the government's manoeuvrings in Islamabad last week, which were projected as an effort to save the Women's Protection Bill, only helped to throw this piece of legislation into cold storage. The fact is that the government's policy of seeking the approval of the MMA for the proposed bill amounted to giving a new lease on life to the Hudood ordinances that had given birth to the Women's Action Forum in the first place.

Initially organised as a body to struggle for women's rights and lobby for the repeal of the unjust and discriminatory laws that were being enacted in quick succession by the Zia regime, WAF emerged as a powerful pressure group. It challenged the government's anti-woman policies and made its voice heard against the law of

evidence and the Qisas and Diyat laws. It also began taking up various issues of concern to women, ranging from their exclusion from spectator sports to their poor status in the health, education and employment sectors. In the process, WAF also worked to create public awareness about women's rights and create consciousness in a large number of them that changed their perception of their own role in society and gave a boost to their self-esteem.

WAF's contribution in giving birth to a nascent women's movement in the country has been widely - though grudgingly - acknowledged by many. Its impact on national life manifested itself in another way, though this has not been so widely recognised. The Women's Action Forum radicalised the politics of dissent at a time when General Ziaul Haq ruled the country with an iron fist. His was the darkest period in the history of Pakistan when repressive laws were enacted to curb the freedoms of the citizens. Censorship silenced the press. Brutal punishments such as whipping and flogging, the threats of stoning and the amputation of limbs terrorised the people into abject submission.

Not many summed up the courage to challenge the government's writ. The state institutions such as the judiciary had already fallen in line and the few individual judges who refused to conform with the military dictator's wishes were edged out. It was the judiciary that was used to execute an elected prime minister, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. His party was paralysed and his wife and daughter were first thrown into prison and then sent into exile. In this scenario, which could have led to widespread despair and despondency, WAF was the only organisation that kept people's sights trained on the light at the end of the tunnel.

It may not have been as a result of calculated deliberation, but WAF's success in mobilising women and bringing them out on the streets (even though in modest numbers) and collecting thousands of signatures proved to be a catalyst for politics when the political process was all but dead. Women defied martial law regulations to demonstrate their anger at the discriminatory and anti-women policies of the Zia regime. They broke the ice and soon enough liberal-minded men who

supported the struggle for women's rights and human rights joined hands with WAF.

Initially there was an intense debate in WAF about the causes it should espouse. Since it had started as a body fighting for the repeal of the Hudood ordinances - which by implication amounted to a struggle for women's rights - it was felt that WAF's role should be that of a champion of women's rights. In their book *Women of Pakistan: Two Steps Forward, One Step Back?* Khawar Mumtaz and Farida Shaheed observe, "... the public became suddenly interested in the political potential of WAF ... [it] was approached by trade unions, politicians and intellectuals who all offered advice on how WAF could be more effective. WAF was urged to form links with various other organisations and groups and work for the restoration of democracy. When WAF refused to act on this advice and continued to confine itself to women's issues, the level of criticism increased. WAF was accused of playing into the government's hands by diverting attention from the more serious and basic problem of martial law versus democracy."

Though WAF chose to be non-political in its structure and functioning and maintained its distance from the political parties, it gradually began adopting a position on issues that did not fall exclusively within the purview of the women's question. This can be attributed to the close link between women's problems and politics which cannot be de-linked. This was evident at WAF's anniversary celebration last week where two women activists - one a labour leader from Balochistan and the other from the Pakistan Fisherfolk's Forum - spoke of problems that were purely of a political nature.

The former recounted the opposition she had faced from the feudals in her area when she sought re-election because of her contributions to the masses in her constituency. The latter spoke of the travails of the fisherfolk (mainly men) who were not granted licences by the government and were picked up and thrown into Indian prisons when they inadvertently strayed into Indian waters.

Given this thrust, it is not surprising that of the eight resolutions adopted at the anniversary

function, six were of a general nature. Thus the demand for the repeal of the Hudood ordinances - endorsed very vociferously by the audience - and an end to practices like *swara*, *vani*, *karo kari* and so on focused on women. But WAF also condemned the new labour laws, demanded an end to the military action in Balochistan, called for provincial autonomy, resolved to strengthen movements for the protection of people's livelihood and build forces to counter and defeat the forces of globalisation, and opposed violence in Iraq, Afghanistan, Kashmir, Palestine, Lebanon and all regions facing militarist aggression.

It is now more than obvious that WAF's major contribution has been integrating the women's problem with political issues - a connection that has come to be realised all over the world. Given the fact that women constitute nearly half of the population in every society and the growing recognition of their substantial, though invisible, role in the economy and social development of a people, it is natural that the woman's perspective has assumed greater importance. But if WAF is to survive, it will have to keep its distance from political parties, many of which would love to have it enter their fold.

P.S.

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