

Raising women's voices in Pakistan

Thursday 26 April 2007, by [McILROY Jim](#) (Date first published: 19 April 2007).

“The Women Workers Help Line is a member-based, voluntary, non-profit making, non-governmental organisation, struggling to create legal, political, democratic and trade union awareness among women for a socially just, economically equitable, politically aware and gender sensitive society”, explains the WWHL’s vision statement. *Green Left Weekly’s* Jim McIlroy visited Bushra Khaliq, the WWHL’s general secretary, at the organisation’s Lahore headquarters in late March.

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In an introduction to the WWHL’s activity report for 2000-05, Khaliq noted, “Women are almost half of Pakistan’s population, but they have never been allowed equal political, economic and social opportunities. Customary practices and discriminatory laws generally govern their social life ... We believe that the emancipation of women is only possible through class struggle, shoulder to shoulder with male comrades, but special attention has to be paid to the specific problems limited to women only.

“Home-based working women from the informal sector are in a pathetic condition. They need to be organised and to be inducted into the mainstream of the labour force. While in factories, women workers in some cases have to work 10-12 hours each day at wages between Rupees 1000 to 1200 [A\$25-\$30] per month only. Maternity leave, old age benefits, group insurance and other labour laws are not extended to working women either. Most appointments are made orally. Without contract paper these workers do not have a leg to stand on if they decide to take their case to court.

“In most working class areas, girls still stay home to help their mothers with household chores while their brothers go to school. It is normal in most homes, even now, for women to eat last and least. Domestic violence against women, wife-battering to be precise, is perhaps the most common and widespread crime. Yet, it is not even a cognisable offence in Pakistan. The state and society has turned a blind eye to the bashing of women. Women are beaten and occasionally killed to preserve the ‘honour’ of the family and clan.”

“In a nutshell”, Khaliq writes, “the present scenario presents a gloomy picture of women’s conditions in general, and working women’s in particular. Under these circumstances, WWHL feels responsible to come forward and provide Pakistani women with a viable platform to raise their voices with full force.”

The introduction explains that the WWHL uses protests, rallies, sit-ins and other forms of action to oppose the oppression of women. It is also training women activists through legal, political and trade union education programs, “preparing the ground for a class-based women workers’ movement in Pakistan”.

WWHL was established in 2000. Khaliq told GLW that it “organises women workers to start to struggle against discriminatory laws and unfair practices by employers, as well as any unfair behaviour by trade union leaders. We are an all-women group, led by an all-women general council and board, confident and vocal about exercising our rights.”

Khaliq explained that WWHL’s work is largely focused in Punjab province. It has about 2000 members, but is “planning to expand in the near future. We are proposing a Women’s Conference in the middle of this year, with the idea of opening membership to all women.

“The Help Line tackles domestic violence through the legal process. We have strong relationships within the communities, at the grassroots level. We organise through local groups, with regular meetings of women in the communities.

“In the industrial area, for example, we have established a working committee in one factory, in which no women were previously involved. Unfortunately, trade union structures in Pakistan are very fragile, with disorganisation and corrupt leadership in many cases. Often, up until now, women have not been encouraged to get involved.”

WWHL has strong alliances with other organisations including the Labour Party Pakistan, the Joint Action Committee for People’s Rights, the National Trade Union Federation and women’s organisations, as well as internationally.

Khaliq told GLW that one of the organisation’s current priority campaigns is “against the Hudood Ordinance, which is extremely negative to women”. The Hudood Ordinance was introduced by the Zia dictatorship in 1979, discriminating against women in the area of divorce, ‘adultery’ and rape.

“We are also focusing on home work [out-work] involving mainly women, which has been expanded by the neoliberal policies of privatisation and outsourcing promoted by the military regime [of General Pervez Musharraf]. Industries are being closed and the contract system strengthened.

“Home work is highly dangerous and stressful, with women forced to stay within the home. Moreover, they are generally not considered as workers — their contribution is not recognised. There are no laws to cover their legal rights or provide social security.” WWHL is demanding that the government ratify relevant International Labour Organisation conventions on home-based work, and provide legal coverage, social security and insurance.

“While there have been some steps forward for women in Pakistani society — including one-third representation in parliament and some increased involvement in other organisations such as trade unions — male domination remains largely in place”, Khaliq said. “Women are not truly able to represent their class and community. Women are often illiterate, and not able to assert their rights. Men generally dominate, making decisions on behalf of women.

“The women in parliament are from the upper classes, from feudal and wealthy families. They are elected, not from the masses, but from reserved seats. Women representatives are generally not aware of women’s real issues.”

Discussing women’s participation in the economy, Khaliq said that women are “part of the work force but largely invisible, not counted. There is little awareness of women’s contribution to the total income of the country.

“Women face double oppression, from family members and the social structure, as well as from contractors and middle men within the economy. We are demanding that the government collect national level data on working women, as a first step toward recognising their role in society.”

Commenting on the future, Khaliq said: “When the Benazir Bhutto government came into office [in the 1990s], women were optimistic. But even with a woman leader, nothing much changed. The feudal structures remained intact.

“Now, with the military dictatorship, General Musharraf is trying to present a ‘liberal’ image to the West on women and other issues. But he is not willing to challenge [Islamic] fundamentalist control — he relies on fundamentalist support for his regime. The fundamentalist parties now control two provincial governments. They all work in with Western interests in the end.”

Khaliq described Pakistan’s current political structure as “very negative for women’s emancipation”. She said: “It is the basic right of women and workers to have a democratic government that really represents the people. If we want to see a big change in society, there must be a genuine political alternative. The only way to transform society is to carry out a major political revolution, with a comprehensive agenda for serious change — like in Venezuela at present.

“There are big changes happening in Venezuela, remarkable changes. Venezuela provides a good model for the people, including women, fighting against the agenda of neoliberal globalisation, against the free market economy. We must learn lessons from the government and people of Venezuela.

“Just as in Venezuela, we in Pakistan need health care, education and jobs for the whole population. We also need equal rights for women and men. This is the way forward for Pakistan, as well as the rest of the world.”

P.S.

* From: International News, Green Left Weekly issue #707 25 April 2007.