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WOMEN'S ACTION FORUM LAHORE

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NEWSLETTER - 1

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PRESS RELEASE AND RESOLUTIONS PASSED ON 24TH MARCH 1982

Women's Action Forum is a non political lobby consisting of women's organizations and concerned individuals which works to safeguard the present status of women and reverse the trend to isolate and segregate them.

A resolution was passed by WAF for the immediate setting up of a National Commission on the Status for Women. This was presented by a delegation to the President in February. The President said that steps to implement it had already been taken. WAF Lahore supports this resolution and feels that this Commission should be headed by a woman from a province other than the Punjab, in appreciation of the work done by women of other provinces.

WAF Lahore initiated a successful signature campaign in support of the Family Laws Ordinance and other issues concerning women. It has also had several meetings to research and disseminate the role and position of women in Islam, in Pakistan and other Muslim countries.

WAF feels that views such as those expressed by persons like Dr. Israr Ahmed in a recent interview in an Urdu daily are contrary to the spirit of Islam and undermine the vital role that women have played in the creation of Pakistan and its subsequent development. Let us not forget that it was a woman who first raised the flag of our homeland. The women of Pakistan are determined to continue to contribute to the growth and future of our nation.

In order for women to be able to express themselves WAF feels that women should be given time both on radio and on television.

In view of Dr. Israr's further statement of the Star on 23.3.1982, which is derogatory to half the population of this country, WAF demands again that he be removed from the Majlis-e-Shoora.

WAF Lahore thanks the President for clarifying the fact that Dr. Israr is not an authority on the women's issue. Therefore WAF Lahore demands that he be removed from all decision making bodies where his personal bias might influence the nature of laws that relate to women.

Furthermore, since women constitute 52% of the population, WAF feels that women should be given better representation on the Council of Islamic Ideology and other decision-making bodies.

Editorial note:

Ever since the Pakistan Movement, the women of our country have actively participated in the creation and development of Pakistan. Women's contributions to the welfare and progress of the country have been repeatedly acknowledged by all our leaders, starting from the Quaid-e-Azam. Women have always been encouraged to work shoulder to shoulder with men.

Yet today, after 35 years of slow but steady progress in the field of women's rights and their participation in national development, and despite Pakistan being a signatory to the U.N. International Women's Year Declaration which binds Pakistan to promoting equality between men and women, the women of this country have begun to feel that their rights are endangered. Despite repeated assurances on the part of the Government of its commitment to protecting women's rights, a certain sector of society has taken it upon itself to interpret 'protection' as 'limiting women's participation in economic, social and cultural activities'. These same people claim that they know what is best suited for women, and are actively voicing their opinions. It is the voice of such people, coupled with the spread of mostly unfounded rumours, which has resulted in a growing concern amongst women that their hard fought for rights are being threatened.

But if the women, themselves, do not express their concerns and opinions, it is more than likely that issues which affect their lives will be decided upon without their participation. If, on the other hand, women are to participate in such decision-making it is essential that there be a forum where they can individually and collectively express themselves, and which in turn can speak on their behalf, HENCE, Women's Action Forum.

Women's Action Forum (WAF) hopes that it can become the vehicle for expressing the sentiments and concerns of all Pakistani women from every walk of life. WAF is not an organisation, but a national platform for all concerned women's organizations and individuals. That there is a need for such a collective platform is obvious from the response that WAF has received throughout the country.

Initially set up in Karachi where the following organizations are actively involved: APWA, Behbud, Business and Professional Women's Club (Karachi), Federation of Business and Professional Women, Shirkat Gah, Anjuman-e-Jamhooriyat-Pasand Khawateen, and Tehrikh-e-Niswan, WAF soon became established in Lahore where in addition to a large number of individuals, APWA, Anjuman-Jamhooriyat-Pasand-Khawateen, Tehrikh-e-Khawateen and PWI (?) have endorsed it. WAF has now been set up in Islamabad as well, and we hear that Peshawar, Multan and Jhang are following suit.

In order to reach as many women as possible, WAF has decided to start a newsletter. It is hoped that this newsletter will serve to keep you in touch with WAF activities and women's issues, and to keep us in touch with you.

Women's Action Forum Lahore strongly condemns the opinions voiced by Dr. Israr Ahmed concerning the role and position of women in Pakistan, as reported in a daily newspaper. WAF takes strong exception to the fact that such ignorant and irresponsible statements on the part of a supposedly learned person are given exposure on the national media. By asking for an end to all female employment and the restriction of women to their homes, Dr. Israr is trying to deny women not only their right to equal participation in national development, but their inherent, constitutional and Islamic rights as citizens. WAF Lahore demands that views such as these not be given exposure either on the media or in decision-making bodies. WAF therefore demands that Dr. Israr's weekly programme on P.T.V. be immediately stopped. We further demand that he be removed from the Majlis-e-Shoora and from the Islamic Ideology Council.

Resolution regarding Spectator Sports

WAF Lahore supports the resolution regarding women's sports passed by WAF Rawalpindi - Islamabad. It shows further concern and seeks clarification about the reports regarding women's sports in the local newspapers and would like to demand that all sports should be open to women and that the women should be allowed to participate in national and international competitions.

Meeting of WAF General Body held at FWI, Kirnaid College on 1st March 1982.

Women's Action Forum (Lahore and its Activities)

WAF is a non-political pressure-cum-lobby group, concerned with women's rights. As a forum, and not an organization, it seeks to bring together as many women's organizations and individuals as possible to form a united voice of Pakistani women. It aims to:

1. Safeguard, strengthen and implement existing women's rights.
2. Promote women's consciousness concerning their rights.
3. Strive to change social attitude amongst both men and women in order to raise the status of women.

As a forum, WAF takes up specific issues as and when the need arises, and tries to mobilize women and public opinion. Towards these ends, WAF has adopted a variety of different methods:-

Signature Campaign

With regards to the following issues, WAF decided to launch a signature campaign:-

- (a) The maintenance and strengthening of the Family Laws Ordinance (1961).
- (b) The demand for protection of women in the custody of the law.
- (c) The demand for promoting female education without incurring the economic burden of trying to establish separate and parallel institutions of higher education which the country can ill afford.
- (d) The demand for lifting all restrictions on women's participation in spectator sports.
- (e) The demand for lifting all restrictions on cultural activities in educational institutions.

Within the space of one short month, WAF collected over 7,000 signatures from all over Pakistan (over 2,000 were collected by WAF Lahore):

Results

This efforts combined with the efforts of other women's organizations and individual women (notably Begum Rana Liaquat Ali) resulted in the President clarifying the Government's position and stating that the Family Laws Ordinance was not being touched.

A clarification was given by the Information Secretary (Punjab) to a delegation of WAF (Lahore) that there was no official ban on cultural activities in educational institutions. For the sports issue, see below on resolutions.

Spreading Information and Awareness

WAF members have been writing about women's issues, their concerns and problems and rights in articles and letters in the newspapers. In addition, WAF has hosted a series of talks on women's rights:

2-11-81, Shaheen Attiq spoke on women's legal rights under the Family Laws Ordinance (61)

Jamila Siddiqi related the social history of the women's movement leading up to the Ordinance.

14-1-82, Rafiullah Shaab, 'Status of Women, Custom vs Law'

4-3-82, Shala Zia, 'Women's Rights in Islamic Countries'

PARTICIPATION IN AND SOLIDARITY WITH OTHER WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONS

APWA held its Triennial Conference in Lahore between the 16-18 February, 1982. It was an extremely successful conference in which all participants were out-spoken and vocally supported women's rights, WAF sent a delegation which participated in all the different workshops and were invited by APWA to actually vote in the final plenary session on the different resolutions.

On March 8th, 1982 International Women's Day, WAF sent greeting to the Movement de Liberation Femmes, France, and to the Pakistan Women's Institute, Lahore.

On March 22, 1982 WAF sent a message to the Women's Social Organization (Lahore) held on the occasion of 23rd March.

Resolutions

Concerning women's participation in spectator sports, WAF (Lahore) endorsed the resolution passed by WAF (Islamabad) and further asked for a clarification from the Government.

Result: On 2.3.82 (Pakistan Times) the President did say that if Pakistani women wanted to play hockey, they were free to do so, however, WAF is still waiting for further clarification.

Mobilizing Public Opinion

On March 12, 1982 Dr. Israr Ahmed in an interview to 'Jang' called for all working women to be pensioned off and in future for all women to be confined to their houses. It is to be noted that not only is Dr. Israr a member of the Majlis-e-Shoora, but that he has been given a weekly programme on T.V. (Al-Huda) on which he gives a lecture on Islam. Consequently, as an acknowledged scholar of Islam, Dr. Israr was presenting his personal views as being the tenets of Islam.

In response to this statement, WAF Karachi, Islamabad and Lahore all passed resolutions condemning his views and demanding an end to his appearance on T.V. as well as his removal from the Majlis-e-Shoora.

WAF was not alone - The Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs also passed a similar resolution. Begum Asghari Rahim led a procession outside the PTV station in Karachi, in which the wife of Gen. Abbasi (Governor of Sind) was present. APWA, Karachi called a meeting of 19 organizations who unanimously condemned the statement.

In Lahore, WAF called on other women's organizations to pass similar resolutions and urged women and organizations to send telegrams and letters to various Government officials including the President. Subsequently, APWA (Lahore) and the Pakistan Women's Lawyers Association passed resolutions. WAF itself, sent telegrams to various people and a delegation went to see the Information Secretary (Punjab) to make their protest.

The issue has taken on national dimensions, with individuals, political parties and almost all women's organizations having taken some position on this issue. The list is too long to enumerate, but for instance the Pakistan Medical Association, which until now has never passed any resolution concerning non-professional matters felt it was important enough for them to break with this tradition. In fact, this became so much of a national issue that Gen. Zia-ul-Haq has clarified the situation, re-assuring women that their rights are not being threatened. Furthermore, PTV has assured women that Dr. Israr will not be allowed to continue appearing on Al-Huda.

ALL OF THIS WITHIN 10 DAYS of the statement appearing' This just goes to show that if women decide to join together and take action, it is possible to build up public opinion and attain positive results. It is imperative therefore, that women from all walks of life and throughout Pakistan should get together under one umbrella. We call on all of you individually and collectively to join Women's Action Forum and make it into such an umbrella.

During International Women's Year, 1975, the need for establishing a National Commission on the Status of Women in Pakistan was recognised. Approximately 2 years ago, the present Government announced its intention of setting up this body. The Commission would be responsible for investigating the conditions under which women live & work, for identifying areas which have a negative impact on the status of women and for finding and proposing concrete means by which the status of Pakistani Women could be improved. As such, the Commission is extremely important.

At the conclusion of APWA'S Triennial Conference, the President informed a delegation that steps were already being taken and once again reiterated the Government's request to individuals and women's organizations for suggestions for the Commission's structure and women who would sit on and head the Commission. At a meeting on the 17th, WAF (Lahore) with APWA, Women's Social Organization, Tehrik-e-Khawatin, passed a resolution saying that in appreciation of the contributions of women from other provinces the women of Punjab would like the Commission to be headed by a woman from one of the other provinces.

Dear sister,

Some people think they know what is best for the women of this country, WAF thinks that only women know what is best for themselves. However, WAF feels that women seldom express themselves, and more often are denied a forum to do so. WAF wants to change that. It is true that women are often ignorant of the problems facing their sisters because we remain isolated with no means of communication, but you will be surprised at how many of us share the same problems and concerns, regardless of where we work or live. WAF wants to be a forum where all Pakistani women can express themselves.

WAF feels that it is essential that women play an active role in deciding issues concerning women, but for this it is necessary that we first reach across and get to know each other so that we can raise a strong 'women's voice'. Together the women of Pakistan can influence policies and plans far more effectively than women singly or in scattered groups.

HOWEVER, WAF can only be as effective as the women of this country make it. To ensure that WAF becomes a national platform for all Pakistani women, we need your help, your support, your voice. We need to know your problems before we can together solve them, and to solve them we need your participation.

WRITE TO US, COME TO OUR MEETING OR CALL US TO YOURS.