

Report on the Mini Convention , March , 1994.

A mini national convention was held in Lahore in March . Keeping in mind that WAF members from Karachi and Islamabad would be in Lahore to participate in the ASR Conference on Women's Studies , it had been decided at the WAF National Convention earlier this year , that a mini convention should be held in March.

The main objective of this meeting was to discuss WAF in the context of today's imperatives. The main item on the agenda was WAF's relationship with women's ngos , many of which have been formed after WAF and which are also addressing themselves to issues , or to work related to issues , which had been initially raised by WAF in the Zia days.

As this was not the first time that WAF members have felt the need to look at WAF critically , the question "Whither WAF?" has been periodically , this meeting was seen to part of a process that is integral to WAF and to the women's movement , and not as a one off conclusive discussion . In so far as WAF itself is a part of the flow of history it is subject to changed and changing conditions. Questions regarding its identity and relevance and the modalities within which it operates are a necessary part of WAF both as an idea and as a process. The issue of WAF's relationship with NGOs comprising WAF members was discussed within the context of the changed political scene where the shift from dictatorship to democracy had , at one level , served to confuse the focus of the women's movement . Identifying and fighting a clearly defined enemy in the shape of Zia was easier than under a democratic government where the issues were constantly in danger of being swallowed up by other political considerations and affiliations.

The main question raised during the mini convention was that of WAF's relationship with women's ngos which are run by WAF members and which in fact have developed their particular focus because of the WAF experience.

The expectation from these ngos had been that their work would feed into WAF and vice versa. Although this had to some extent been true in the earlier stages of the relationship , it was now felt that ngos had developed a somewhat proprietary attitude towards their own work and that there was a lack of sharing and of work input in WAF

Many WAF members felt that those of its members who are involved with NGO work are not giving enough time to WAF and that WAF is suffering because of this shift in priorities. That it was now a question of the NGO identity versus WAF's identity.

Given this situation , the question was whether WAF had any further role to play vis a vis women's issues etc.

The general consensus was that yes WAF was needed because it alone could play a certain role which was outside the scope /capacity of ngos. Being dependent on donor money for their projects ,NGO work is always in danger of losing the political edge of issue taken up. As a non-funded group / organisation / forum with a history of political resistance WAF has a particular identity and a credibility which ngos cannot have. Further it provides an umbrella for other organisations and individuals which an NGO , by definition , cannot do.

This was because that WAF an activist organisation/ platform/ forum for other ngos and organisations. It differs from ngos in the sense that it has members and not a paid staff and that any work done by its members is voluntary and dependent on the involvement and commitment of members to this work.

While there was a general agreement that WAF is not and cannot be run as efficiently as an NGO for these very reasons , its effectiveness and relevance is also due to the fact that because it is not dependent on funds for the work it does it retains a political edge that ngos can and often do lose because of their dependency on donors etc.

While some members stated that it would be unrealistic for WAF to expect ngos to give a major chunk of their time to WAF it was also felt that members , and this referred to all members ,and not only to those on the working committee or to those involved with ngos, needed to concentrate more on WAF work and to give it more active time.

However , it was also felt that while WAF couldnot dictate to ngos , and that there should be a certain mutuality in the work being done by WAF and the ngos and that there should be a sharing rather than a proprietary attitude with regard to the work/issues taken up.

WAF Membership

Another issue that was raised was WAF's inability to attract new members and to retain old ones. The following reasons were given for this:

Bickering among members which puts off new people .

That WAF is too political and or radical and this drives people away

Not enough concrete work being done plus too much talk. This drives away the younger lot.

1. With regard to point no.1. re. bickering. It was decided that certain rules be observed by members in their dealings with each other. Primarily, issues should not be personalised and criticism should be aimed at issues /approaches, strategies and not at individuals. It was also stated that intra-NGO and/ or other conflicts and problems etc. should not be played out in WAF.

2. Re. the fact that WAF is too political or radical. There was a general agreement on this point. It was felt, however, that there has to be a cut off point where WAF has to decide whether it wants a wider membership or whether it wants to pursue the goals it has set out for itself. The general feeling was that issues were more important than a large membership which might be lacking in commitment to WAF's goals.

It was felt that it was essential that WAF should retain its political edge especially now with the restitution of democracy issues have a tendency to get confused and which ngos tend to loose.

3. Regarding concrete work and the younger generation Waffers. It was felt that we need to work this out at the GB and with other members re concrete issues that can be followed up by those interested.

Another question that was raised was " Should WAF have ideological clarity?"

In this case a distinction needs to be made between issues on which WAF has taken very clear ideological stands and other issues on which it still has to work out its position. This again is an ongoing and very important process and one that should not be neglected

The fact that WAF today calls itself a secular organisation and has formulated its position of women's human rights or that it has taken very clear positions on the Hadood Ordinances etc. bear witness to its political/ideological identity.

The issue is not one of ideological clarity but
 However, the problem lies in the fact that many WAF members are themselves not clear about or aware of the positions taken by WAF. There was general agreement that WAF members need to find out what WAF stands for. In this context it is necessary that the working committee should provide new and old members with the WAF statement of demands, its Charter and other documents which state WAF's position on different issues. The final responsibility for finding out and understanding these positions is of course with individual members.

In this regard it was decided that where WAF cannot hold ngos accountable for their work as long as it does not contravene WAFs positions , WAF will need to haul up members who directly contravene the stands taken by WAF e.g. a WAF member who upholds the Blasphemy Law or argues in favour of polygamy will be asked to rethink their relationship with WAF.

It was felt that WAFs positions on issues should be compiled for easy access. Re. issues on which positions have yet to be taken , sub-committees should continue the process as they have already done in the past.

Regarding the issue of making WAF more efficient , Hina argued that we should stop nominating members to the working committee and have an elected WC only as this she felt would make the WC more responsible. The elected WC would have the mandate to co-opt other members from the GB if necessary.

It was also felt that the GB should be more active. It is not a question of us + them

As stated at the outset , Mini Convention was not a conclusive meeting but a part of an essential and important process of self analysis etc. which is integral to WAF as an organisation and to its place within the women's movement.

★ We all have to participate in the work and propose/initiate action that we feel is necessary.