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Received S.G.P.K.
Dated 6-8-94

REPORT : WAF MEETING ON "RESERVED SEATS FOR WOMEN".

Women's political participation and empowerment through the decision-making processes has been an important issue in the women's movement. The 1973 Constitution provided for special seats for women in the National and Provincial Assemblies. However, the provision was made for a fixed number of years. The period having expired, no special seats are allocated for women in the present Assemblies. Women have felt the need for the reservation of seats as an affirmative action, considering the social and political conditions which exist owing to discrimination against women in the provision of opportunities in all fields.

Provision in the original Constitution (and the extension of the fixed period in 1986) was a part of the affirmative action for women. However, it is a fact that owing to the frequent and protracted breaks in the political process in the country and due to the suspension/abeyance of the Constitution, the beneficial effects of the action could not be achieved and the marginalisation of women continues. In order to extend the benefits of democracy to women it is essential that their participation in Parliamentary politics be promoted through special measures and steps be taken to achieve a parity of rights and equality for men and women.

Women's organisations view the discontinuation of the reserved seats as a denial of participation in the political process and have expressed deep concern over it. It is, nevertheless, true that most of the women's organisations have been dissatisfied with the method of inducting women in the reserved seats. This dissatisfaction is justified owing to the failure of women members to act in the interest of women. It is generally felt that the previous method was not conducive to giving genuine representation to women, nor to making the members directly accountable to women as a constituency.

Despite the continuing debate on the most effective and workable method of induction to the reserved seats, no concrete recommendations have so far come from women's organisations. The number of seats to be reserved in order to constitute adequate representation is also an issue which needs consideration, and consultation amongst women's organisations. In view of this need, WAF had oraganised a consultation to which women's organisations, political parties representatives and legal and human rights experts were invited to participate.

convey the outcome of the discussion to the Pakistan Muslim League (N) and the Pakistan People's Party, respectively.

There was a general consensus amongst the participants that both the Government and the Opposition be given a deadline for action on the issue. Although no date was set for the deadline, it was decided that if the political parties do not come up with any position on the issue by the end of July 1994, women's organisations would mobilise for action and a campaign on this issue would be initiated.

WAF had taken the responibility for initiating the campaign and to give the call for action. It was suggested that WAF convene a seminar on the issue as a first step in this process. The proposal is to be considered by the General Body and a date for the seminar will be set on confirmation by the G.B. The format of the campaign will also be set by the G.B. The other Chapters should also be consulted and the activity co-ordinated with them, if possible.

As the issue seems to have gone into the background because of various political developments, some re-activation is necessary. It is proposed that formal letters be despatched to the political parties and selected parliamentarians for their comments on the proposals made at the consultation. Report of the Consultation also be circulated to all organisations. The response of the two main political parties through their representatives, made at the meeting of Action For Legal Reform, held in Islamabad, can be used as reference in the letters aforementioned. It is also recommended that the Working Committee and/or a special committee be mandated to hold consultations with individuals, organisations, or political party representatives in connection with this issue.