

Neelam Hussain

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WAF NATIONAL CONVENTION Lahore 18th-20th January, 1996.

Session one: Chair - Lahore Samina Rahman.

Islamabad delegation comprised Nageen Iqbal, Soofia Muntaz, Aisha Ghaznavi and Tahira Abdullah, Lahore was represented by Samina Rahman, Nighat Said Khan, Tauseef Hyat, Tasnim Baig, Nancy Hammond, Farzana Muntaz, Javeria Khalid, Neelan Hussain, Tahira Mazhar Ali, Rubina Jamil, Aima Ahmed, Lala Rukh, Imrana Khwaja, Khadija Gauhar, Shuhraj Qizilbash, Asma Jahangir, Huma Safdar, Farida Shaheed and Fareeha Zafar. Karachi was absent the first day of the convention and was represented by Anis Haroon for the next two days.

The Convention opened with a welcome from Lahore and a reminder of the reasons why the WAF National Convention, scheduled to be held on March 30th and 31st, 1995, in Lahore had been cancelled a day before it was to be held. It was explained that the events in Karachi had created conditions which had made it difficult for the Chapter to function. Some of the members had also been active in peace Committees and other efforts to deal with the Karachi situation. Since Karachi WAF had been inactive for a long time it asked for an initial postponement of three months. After that WAF members became involved in preparations for Beijing and other engagements and the Convention was not rescheduled in 1995. The last Convention was held in Islamabad in January 1994.

The first item on the morning agenda dealt with personal introductions. The focus of the introductions was each member's perception of WAF and her particular involvement in and hopes for the organisation.

Neither Lahore nor Karachi had ratified the minutes of the 1994 Convention held in Islamabad. Lahore apologised to Islamabad for not responding to the minutes and told them that Lahore had certain additions and/or corrections to propose which they would convey to them by the last session on Saturday. Lack of time made that impossible so it was proposed that Lahore send the ratified minutes to Islamabad as soon as possible.

Islamabad read out its Chapter report followed by Lahore reading theirs. Anis Haroon from Karachi had not yet arrived as her morning flight had been cancelled so Karachi's report was postponed till later. The Convention was told by the Lahore chapter that Musarrat Hilaly from Peshawar WAF had been contacted and had expressed her inability to attend but had promised to contact other members and get back to Lahore, but had not done so.

Session two: Chair - Islamabad Aisha Ghaznavi

The post-lunch session was chaired by Aisha Ghaznavi from Islamabad. The agenda was finalised and certain items were added. These included 1) membership of foreigners on the working committee, 2) WAF's relationship with government processes, 3) Registration or non-registration, and 4) the NGO Bill.

Since Lahore had circulated certain proposals regarding the restructuring of WAF to make it a more effective body, Nighat Khan from Lahore made a presentation of possible scenarios regarding WAF's organisation.

SCENARIO ONE: PLATFORM/FORUM

WAF should play a vanguard role and not compromise on positions it has evolved after a prolonged struggle as well as debate and discussion over the many years of its existence. Those organisations in complete agreement with WAF's charter and positions should be invited to come on to a Central Committee/working committee as member organisations. The other members of the Central Committee/working committee would be drawn from individual WAF members. This would commit all individuals in member organisations to WAF positions and actions and enlarge and strengthen WAF. Member organisations would, as far as practicable and possible, undertake their activism from WAF's platform and all actions would be taken in WAF's name.

Need to discuss this in large meeting

SCENARIO TWO: NETWORK OF ORGANISATIONS

WAF act as a coordinating body for various groups and organisations on the basis of a minimum agenda. One of the problems with this scenario was that it precluded individual membership. The other was that to gain the widest possible consensus WAF would have to water down its own positions.

SCENARIO THREE: WAF AS INDIVIDUAL MEMBERS IN A NATIONAL ORGANISATION

WAF charter and positions would remain the basis for membership. There would be individual members who could join their city committees. There would be an Annual meeting primarily for policy making. This meeting would also elect a National Committee. Work would be carried out through committees (e.g Lahore chapter would be a committee). There could be any number of committees in one city/town. Some of the problems with this would be of a procedural and logistical nature. There would be need for an infrastructural base like funds office etc., There was also the perception that an annual policy making conference is too long a span between meetings. There was agreement that this was an ideal that we need to work towards. The idea of an ANNUAL CONFERENCE open to all members was welcomed and it was suggested that this be combined with the annual WAF convention.

Unlike Lahore which had solicited individual positions from its membership, Islamabad WAF had come with a chapter position. They were clear that WAF should remain open, but felt that they had been functioning effectively and wanted to continue the way they had in the past. They opposed the proposal of a national committee, fearing it might become more elitist; it would also be amorphous and faceless and might rob chapters of autonomy. However after Lahore's detailed presentation they felt that the proposals for restructuring had been clarified sufficiently and since they had come with an open mind they would definitely discuss it with their Working Committee on their return. They also welcomed the idea of a national women's conference.

Lahore decided to implement scenario one and take it to the general body for ratification. Scenario two was rejected by all present.

There was a discussion on whether males could become members of WAF. It was decided that although activities were open to all, men could not become members of WAF. There was a discussion on whether organisations other than women's organisations e.g Human Rights groups, should be invited to join WAF. It was decided that even if such organisations were invited they would be asked to send women.

Session. Three Chair - Lahore Tasnim Baig

Anis Haroon arrived from Karachi and made a presentation on the general situation in Karachi, linking it to the condition of WAF. She explained that between 1993 and 1995 WAF activities had almost ceased to exist. Although members had become tired the basic reason was the Karachi situation. There were no new members and no new activities being generated. Both factors were equally responsible for the present impasse. Apart from the physical insecurity the psychological impact has been most damaging. Nobody is seen as neutral anymore---people are seen as either MQM or establishment and the neutral element is being sidelined.

On the other hand the extra judicial killings and harassment of young men has reached alarming proportions. The polarisation is extreme. When WAF condemned the perpetrators in the Farzana Sultan rape case and asked for changes in legal procedure we were criticised by all sides, including the Sindhiyan Tehreek. WAF is on the defensive and unable to take any principled positions whatsoever. There is an urgent need for WAF to take a clear national political stand. Without that other activities seem irrelevant. Karachi WAF has been planning a tribunal for some time with the families of those killed but so far it has been difficult to gather the families of those killed to share their grief.

The Convention shared Karachi's views on the need for a clear national position on Karachi and a serious and detailed discussion followed on what was perceived to be the most critical item on the agenda.

Islamabad WAF said it endorses the position of CAPS and the Ann Committee and supports a ceasefire, census and a political solution to the Karachi situation.

The Convention eventually decided that all chapters would return to their general bodies with the following proposals:

- Immediate ceasefire on all sides
- General Amnesty (the pros and cons were thrashed out but no decision was reached)
- Multi-lateral and multi-level dialogue
- Census to be conducted by neutral bodies and in a manner acceptable to all sides
- Local bodies elections
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A Committee was proposed with members from Lahore and Islamabad to draft a working document on the basis of which a dialogue would be initiated with Urdu and Sindhi speaking groups. The first draft would be prepared by Lahore WAF members (LalaRah,

Islam Hussain, Farida Shaheed, Nighat Khan and Samina Rahman) and sent to Islamabad by 8th February. The intention was for as many members from Lahore and Islamabad to go to Karachi for a WAF meeting to put together a joint draft. This would form the basis of discussions with Urdu and Sindhi speaking groups. The final WAF position on Karachi would be finalised after this process. Karachi was also to send a copy of the new CAPS position to us.

The next item on the agenda was **women in conflict situations** especially with reference to the role of the Pakistani army in 1971 in the then East Pakistan. It was pointed out that the anniversary of 25 years of the liberation struggle in Bangladesh was coming up by March 3 of this year. WAF has been concerned about the army's action in 1971 and feels that this is an appropriate time to raise the issue and put pressure on the Pakistani government to apologise for the atrocities committed by the Pakistan army.

In the ensuing discussion the Islamabad chapter position was that more work and discussion was needed on the issue before WAF could take a position. They felt that the support for a court case at the ICJ was premature. Some members of the Islamabad chapter felt that the atrocities committed by the Mukhti Bahini and others should also be taken into account.

The Convention felt that while we deplore the use of violence on all sides the responsibility of the state action taken in the people's name was the main issue and there was a difference between the scale of the violence perpetrated by the state and others.

It was proposed that WAF in any case apologise to the women of Bangladesh on its own behalf but continue to put pressure on the government to accept responsibility and tender an apology. Each chapter was to present this at their respective General Bodies for ratification.

A joint draft after agreement from all chapters was to be sent to the Bangladeshi women by March 3rd.

Session 4 Chair - Lahore Imrana Khwaja

The session began with a discussion on **child labour**. Islamabad read out its chapter position and will now incorporate the suggestions made by members at the National Convention and send the draft to Lahore and Karachi.

It was noted that Islamabad's General Body was willing to contribute towards the reprinting costs of the WAF document prepared for Beijing.

The next issue to be discussed was **reproductive rights**. The present WAF position was read out. One of the members reminded the convention that previously WAF had endorsed the Apwa position on abortion, i.e. that it was legal upto 3 months. This was followed by a discussion on the views of different religious groups. WAF's position that all women should have the right to safe abortion is to be added to the WAF document titled Struggle for Women's Rights in Pakistan.

on police thanas was the next issue on the agenda. The consensus was that the thanas should not be run as recommended by WAF. It was decided that each chapter would investigate this issue in more detail. It was also suggested by one of the members that WAF should pursue the possibility of conducting gender sensitivity talks at police academies. The issue of Mode of elections came up on the agenda as Aurat foundation had approached WAF Islamabad for WAF's views on this subject. It was felt that since most members are not conversant with the subject and needed more information some members would be asked to write on the subject so that the various permutations are clear. WAF decided to explore various modes and possibilities which would ensure that women and disadvantaged groups would find fair and adequate representation. Anis would do some work on this subject from Karachi, Shelly from Islamabad and Furzana and Lala from Lahore.

WAF's position on Nuclear Weapons was that:

WAF is against the development, use and proliferation of nuclear weapons globally and particularly the arms build-up in South Asia. Consequently the Government of Pakistan should unilaterally sign the Non-proliferation Treaty.

Members felt that this position would be useful in linking with women's groups in globally (particularly with India).

The issue of the Kalabagh Dam was dropped from the agenda as no one knew enough about it at the moment.

Excerpts from the Charter of Demands on a Uniform Civil Code, drawn up by AGHS was read out, which WAF had endorsed in 1994. It was decided at the last National Convention that WAF was to develop its own position including in it the subject of single men and women and all forms of family. This was not done and consequently has been put to the plan for 1996. WAF will keep the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as its main position. Meanwhile WAF will ask AGHS about further developments on this issue.

The issue of reserved seats for women was discussed at length, particularly the mode of presentation. The Islamabad position on reserved seats was read out by Ayesha haznavi. WAF decided to ask for immediate restoration of women's seats for the present term, with 20% seats for women in the National and Provincial Assemblies as well as the same and 33% seats in the local bodies. A change in the Political Parties Act for future elections to ensure that 20% tickets are given to women by each political party.

The next issue brought up at this session was whether Foreigners could be elected to the organizing committee. Islamabad's stand on this issue was that foreigners could be on the EC if they met the following criteria:

- If the foreigner was married to a Pakistani
- If she had resided in Pakistan for some time.
- If she was an active G.B member.

Point 1 was unanimously rejected. The debate revolved around members identifying with Pakistani issues, public image of WAF, people making policy who did not have a long term commitment, and whether WAF should be considered a Pakistani women's organisation or an organisation open to all women who agreed with the charter. Some suggested that the issue should be dealt with on a case to case basis but final decision was deferred till it had been discussed in the G.B.

Session 5 Chair - Karachi Anis Haroon

Session 5 began with Nighat Said Khan making a presentation on **economy, especially the issue of globalisation, WTO, liberalisation and privatisation**. Nighat said that at the last National Convention the subject of economy was discussed informally. Some of the areas that needed to be considered by WAF so that a position could be formulated were:

- Structural adjustment makes the poor poorer and this naturally affects women.
- By privatising the state abdicates its responsibility to the social sector.
- Privatisation weakens the trade unions.
- Human rights as defined now include the right to education, livelihood etc, but the state was not providing this.
- If education was privatised who would we lobby with.
- Pressures on cities leading to anarchic situation.
- Although capital was becoming freer labour was being restricted, eg strict visa laws.
- WTO agreement signed without approval or debate in National Assembly.
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A note of caution by a member warned that link with trade unions meant coming up against the multi-nationals which could mean stepping into a violent arena and could lead to further division in the G.B. Other suggestions from members were mobilisation on the issue of increased prices, organising a seminar where we linked unemployment and price hike with structural adjustment to interest people. That WAF should educate itself on this issue and understand the impact of globalisation, and link globalisation with the reality on the ground. Another member reminded the convention that the right was also picking up these issues but that the difference between the right and left was in how to resolve the problem. It was agreed that different people would work on different areas of the New Economic Order, while at the same time WAF members would try and educate themselves on the various aspects of the implications. Suggested reading was an article by Najma Sadeque and the Political Economy section of The News on Friday.

Dead line for the above presentations is 8th March.

Anis also suggested that WAF urge the government to sign the covenant of Economic and Political Rights as part of Human Rights.

For 12th February Nighat and Neelum would prepare a one page document on Economic and Political rights and send it to Islamabad and Karachi.

By 1st May we would have material ready on some aspects of the globalisation

Huma on the Language issue

Anis will work with Najma Sadeque on agriculture

Neelum, Shabtaj and Lala on violence

Fareeha, Samina and Aurat on education

Islamabad WAF on Political implications and environmental implications linking up on environment with Shirkatgah, Lahore.

The last issue to be discussed in the 5th session was WAF's relationship with govt processes. This led to a lengthy debate on the advantages and disadvantages of WAF's involvement and some of the questions and ideas discussed were:

- Involvement has helped WAF to put its views into Govt. documents
- What happens when WAF disagrees with Govt. view.
- Should WAF members represent Govt. nationally or internationally as it may mean compromising on certain issues.
- Give inputs but not have a high profile.
- Is there a difference between writing report and being on a govt. delegation
- While helping to write reports we can have inputs as per our positions but in delegation you may have to make compromises or walk out.
- If we stay out we lose out whether its a 5% contribution or a 95% input.
- Does WAF join Govt. as WAF
- WAF should be pressure group but not part of official processes.

Session 6 Chair - Islamabad Aisha Ghaznavi.

Session 6 continued with the discussion on whether WAF or WAF members should be involved with government processes. After some debate it was decided that WAF does not go on national delegations. Ideally WAF would like to stay out and put pressure but if WAF thinks it can contribute positively in government processes than it is to be discussed in the working committee. If an individual member is joining some government process, she should discuss it with the working committee.

WAF agreed to update of **Statement of Demands** as per agreement in August, 1994. WAF also agreed to having one document incorporating the Charter and the Statement of Demands, with a focus on principles rather than details, and this would also include positions taken at the 1996 National Convention. The Charter and Statement of Demands would be supplemented by the document titled Struggle for Women's Rights in Pakistan, which was prepared for the Fourth World Conference on Women, held at Beijing in August-September 1995. Tahira Abdullah was assigned task of writing draft and sending it to the other chapters for approval.

The next item for discussion was the funding of the National Conference of Women. It was decided that funds would be collected from NGO's from their independent sources, and from individuals. The funds would then be pooled together among all the chapters and the Working Committees would decide how to use the funds. Priority for tickets etc would go to WAF members. The National Conference would be held at the same time as the national convention. The next national convention is scheduled for Karachi.

The discussion on the NGO Bill was brief as most members thought it did not effect WAF.

The main issues discussed over the 3 days of the convention were highlighted by the conveners. The main decisions by the WAF National Conventions were as follows:

1. WAF to play a vanguard role

2. Lahore to restructure by trying out scenario 1 but including the national conference of women as envisaged in scenario 3. Scenario 3 to be WAF's long term objective.

3. The holding of the National Conference of Women by WAF.

The meeting wound up with Islamabad thanking Lahore for its hospitality and Karachi apologising because all the members who were supposed to come were not able to attend because of various personal problems.