

The Coalition for Sexual and Bodily Rights in Muslim Societies (CSBR) GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Strategic Planning Meeting

Istanbul, 26 – 29 April, 2007

Draft Meeting Report

I. Introduction

The Coalition for Sexual and Bodily Rights General Assembly / Strategic Planning Meeting, held from April 26th to 29th in Istanbul, was attended by 29 participants from Algeria, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Lebanon, Malaysia, Pakistan, Palestine, the Philippines, Tunisia, and Turkey. A majority, 24 of the 38 organizational Coalition members were represented at the meeting. The first day of the meeting was devoted to an in depth discussion around emerging issues, regional concerns, national, regional and international socio-political contexts. On the second and third days, discussions were held on identifying priority areas for the next few years; constructing a working plan; evaluating the Coalition's contribution to the work of members; evaluating and discussing the Coalition's structure; and the role and responsibilities of the Coordination Office, WWHR-New Ways.

Prior to the meeting, a survey on priority issues, emerging concerns, Coalition's structure and role was circulated among CSBR members. The results of the CSBR survey indicated that the majority of members work on advocacy and research. Thematically, Coalition members have a diverse spectrum of expertise and experience on sexual, reproductive and bodily rights and health. These include legal and policy reform, sexuality education, sexuality and religion, sexual orientation, sexuality and human rights, sexuality and armed conflict, sexual politics, international advocacy.

The overarching emerging concern of network members was increasing religious conservatism and fundamentalisms. The results indicated that the Coalition primarily contributed to its members' work through facilitating networking; sharing information, resources and best practices; joint projects and campaigns; and solidarity.

The Political Context, Emerging themes and Concerns

As the discussion on the present political national contexts revealed, the most underlined issue by the members was that sexual and bodily rights is still a taboo topic. Issues of sexuality and sexual rights are often regarded as an imposed Western agenda, and thus sexual rights advocated are accused of being complicit in this "Western scheme."

The rise of conservative Islamist powers was cited as a major concern. As expressed by the participants, in the post 9/11 context, the increasing Islamophobia, global conservatism and militarism has fueled the religious right in many national contexts, strengthening fundamentalist stances.

Another concern, which was strongly expressed by many participants, was “donor-driven agendas”. In a number of cases, donors approaching the national context without being aware of the specificities and needs, and introducing and/or imposing their ready-made agendas presented a major challenge and obstacle to the NGOs and advocacy around issues related to sexuality.

The necessity, as well as the challenge of building inter-movement alliances on issues of sexuality was also raised as a common concern. Participants also discussed when and how to engage with Islam, and the double bind they encountered such as being labeled “Islamist” when they did engage with Islam, or as “Western agents” when they did not.

However, on a positive tone, the participants group also noted that there are increasingly widening spaces to promote sexual rights in the public domain, both on the national and international levels. Participants also acknowledged the contribution of the Coalition in enabling or supporting these spaces, through sharing of resources and experiences, joint projects, participation at international meetings etc.

II. Objectives and Working Plan

With respect to the Coalition’s work for the next three years, members identified several priority areas based on the question where and in which way we would want to make an impact, as listed below:

- Increasing public awareness raising on sexual rights, furthering the Coalition’s discourse and increasing the Coalition’s visibility on the international level;
- Developing the Coalition’s training potential and capacity building for members;
- Engaging in advocacy at international non-UN platforms and using international UN instruments such as CEDAW, CSW for national advocacy;;
- Conducting research on sexual and bodily rights;
- Facilitating the sharing of information and experiences between members.

To this end, the members proposed a number of exciting projects to work on during the next three years:

I. Awareness raising and visibility: An International Campaign “ONE DAY, ONE STRUGGLE”

The awareness raising group proposed an international campaign on sexual and bodily rights to be undertaken simultaneously by Coalition members in their respective countries. A tentative name for the campaign was proposed: “One Day, One Struggle.” The campaign will aim at drawing international public attention to issues around sexual

and bodily rights; increase the visibility of our work and the Coalition; and increase awareness on sexual rights.

II. Capacity Building and Training: Sexuality training workshop for Coalition members

During the meeting, training of new Coalition members emerged as an obvious need to solidify our common language and vision. Therefore, the Capacity Building group looked at ways to both share and build the information and experience already possessed by older Coalition members, and also discussed how to build the Coalition's training potential. As a first step, the Capacity Building group is working on the preparation of a training workshop in the summer of 2008, aiming to solidify a common language on sexual and bodily rights; improving advocacy skills; and developing a theoretical framework from which we can build our training potential. This training workshop will serve as a step to organizing a wider training in 2009.

III. Comparative International Research on Sexual and Bodily Rights

Since 2001, many coalition members have expressed the need and interest in a joint comparative research project on sexuality, and sexual and bodily rights. In response to interest generated on the listservs and previous meetings, nine members from Bangladesh, Indonesia, Lebanon, Malaysia, Palestine, Pakistan, Tunisia, and Turkey attended a preliminary research brainstorming meeting on 25 – 26 April, 2007.

The interest in this research project arose from our concern that very little relevant research currently exists in the field of sexual and bodily rights, especially research generated in our member countries. Members expressed concern about outsider researchers imposing their values on our work, and identified a common need for research that will further the awareness of sexual and bodily rights discourses and promote advocacy work being done in this field. The research project is expected to be finalized at the end of November 2009.

IV. Advocacy at International Platforms

All members have agreed that increasing advocacy at the international level is essential. Working on the international level serves to raise awareness on our activism and struggle for sexual and bodily rights in our regions, which still remains highly invisible in international fora. International work can be used as an advocacy tool to enhance our efforts on the national level.

Advocacy at the UN Level

The significance of advocacy at the UN level, as well as UN processes were critiqued by a number of participants. Several members stated that the implementation of the UN documents at the national policy levels has been very disappointing. Moreover, given the

enormous human and financial resources the UN processes require, the impact has been quite limited.

The mechanisms and the efficiency of the UN were also questioned. On the other hand, some members argued that despite all its shortcomings, the UN meetings have served as an advocacy tool to approach and lobby their own governments, as well as a platform to counter global conservative powers. Many members identified the need to increase our knowledge of how to use international processes to achieve our goals on the national level.

Advocacy at Non-UN Platforms

Participating at non-UN platforms and organizing panels with Coalition members, aiming at raising awareness on sexual rights; enhancing our advocacy; and increasing the Coalition's visibility, was identified as a priority and a valuable strategy at the meeting.

We decided to participate also in conferences not directly related to issues of sexuality to advance our cause, and to keep an eye out for any meeting which could be a useful platform, even if it is not on sexuality.

V. Information Sharing: Clearinghouse for Information

As a priority objective expressed at our meeting, to increase sharing our resources amongst the Coalition's members, the Clearinghouse for Information group focused on two strategies: the Coalition e-newsletter and a possible Coalition website.

E-Newsletter

The group evaluated the e-newsletter prepared by the coordination office at the beginning of the year and decided to continue with it. It was also decided that the e-newsletter should be designed for external dissemination, not just for use by members.

Website

The Clearinghouse group identified a long-range goal of having a CSBR website, which could contain the Coalition's values, news, archives, and training materials for members' use.

V. Conclusion

We are delighted by the intense amount of work accomplished during our short time together, and excited about the projects we have projected for the next three years. In the current global sociopolitical atmosphere, the Coalition's work is more valuable than ever and we all enjoyed the meeting not only in terms of the work we did, but also as a chance to affirm our solidarity and meet old friends. The meeting was filled with emotions as we reflected on the difficulties we've faced during the past year. We were also filled with

hope and excitement as we reflected on the work we have done so far and the gains we've made in opening up the discourse on sexual and bodily rights.

We remembered our dear colleague Nasreen Huq from Action Aid-Bangladesh, and sent an expression of our support and love back to her community and family. We celebrated our progress with a wonderful new song from Evelyne Accad composed for our meeting, who motivated us to share each other's struggles and languages.

As expressed by the participants, our Coalition General Assembly was very empowering for all of us, reaffirming our strength and solidarity and enhancing our motivation and determination. We realized once again what a unique space we have created, how valuable it was to struggle together for our cause, and how much the Coalition has contributed to our work, as well as to advancing our common discourse and action for sexual and bodily rights.