

# Talking women's sexuality in Muslim societies



Coalition for Sexual and Bodily Rights in Muslim Societies has realized groundbreaking achievements in the Middle East, North Africa and South / Southeast Asia during the past six years

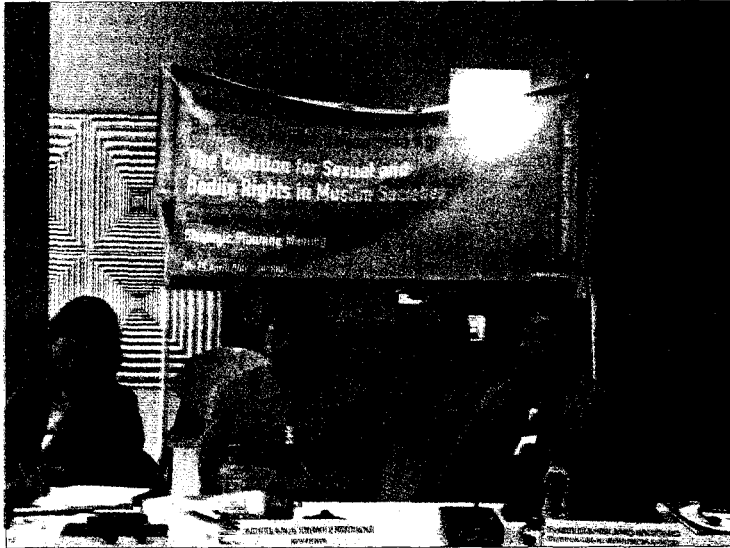
## The New Anatolian / Istanbul

Stabbed to death by your 15 year old brother who figured you might just might be flirting with the grocer's boy down the street? Until the year 2004, your death would merely be the result of an act committed in midst of "mitigating circumstances" that tainted the family honor. The former Turkish Penal Code (TCK) which located women's sexual and bodily integrity under the chapter that criminalized acts against "social morality" have been reformed to a great extent, thus today the violation of your intrinsic right to life has a higher chance of being met.

The TCK reform has had impact not only on the lives of women in Turkey but also in Palestine, Pakistan and Indonesia. The feminist researcher and human rights advocate Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian explains that in Palestine they were able to use the Turkish experience of the reform since they were already in close contact with the women's movement in Turkey. While conducting research on honor killings which she calls

femicide, Nadera became one of the first members of the "Coalition for Sexual and Bodily Rights in Muslim Societies." Initiated by the Istanbul based non-governmental organization (NGO) Women for Women's Human Rights (WWHR) - New Ways, the coalition was founded in 2001. This coalition that is the only solidarity network of its kind now includes 60 leading NGOs and academicians from 15 countries in the Middle East, North Africa and South / Southeast Asia.

The six years old network works on the right to sexual and bodily integrity and the right to sexual orientation while struggling to prevent human rights violations such as female genital mutilation, so-called honor killings, forced marriages, marital rape and the murder of homosexuals. Stressing that these violations are legitimized by taboos surrounding sexuality, WWHR International Program Coordinator Liz Ercevik Amado says that the current global climate of the alarming rise of the conservative right wing, nationalist and militarist forces, in-



crease the need for progressive efforts striving for personal freedoms and equality. Coalition members, who emphasize the devastating impact of wars and armed conflict on human rights and gender equality, are also trying to address the need for sexuality education and issues such

as the spread of HIV / AIDS in their regions.

In countries like Lebanon and Tunisia where previously sexuality was not an issue to be talked about, the coalition pioneered the very first high level international meetings on the right to sexual and reproductive

rights. Amado also notes that during the recent UN meetings the coalition has been successful in fighting the unprecedented alliance of conservative Christian forces like USA and Vatican and Islamic conservative states such as Egypt, Sudan and Pakistan that employed religion to attack the human rights of women and girls and homosexuals. On national and regional levels the coalition also played role in the realization of legal reforms in countries like Turkey, Morocco, Pakistan and Indonesia on issues like the Civil Code, Penal Code and the right to safe abortion.

Noting that when the coalition was first started, they were working on solidarity and advocacy, Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian underlines that now they are also engaged in "researching back," which is another method of resistance against the oppression, she says.

Nadera, who emphasizes that women's bodies are used as a tool of control and oppression especially in severe conflict and war zones like Lebanon and Palestine, also makes note of practices such as morality police in Southeast Asian states. Stressing that the coalition is against the violation of all human rights, Nadera underlines that the affects of globalization and militarization on the economic and political balance harms especially the women and other vulnerable groups.

Another member of the network, the cultural anthropologist from Bangladesh, Dina Siddiqi explains that the coalition has a special place for the feminists in Southeast Asia, which holds the largest Muslim population in the world. "Despite regional differences and cultural specificities", she says "We as women have a lot in common faced with globalization, militarization and colonial legacy. The coalition provides us a safe space for solidarity and empowerment wherein we can share our experiences and strategies."

The coalition's strategy planning meeting held at the Point Hotel in Istanbul has brought together 35 participants from Bangladesh, Algeria, Indonesia, Philippines, Morocco, Palestine, Lebanon, Malaysia, Pakistan, Tunisia, and Turkey. In the upcoming years, the coalition's areas of focus will include research on sexual, bodily and reproductive rights, sexuality education, sexual rights and religion, and lobbying and advocacy for legal reform. The actual realization of sexual and bodily rights as human rights in Muslim societies will no doubt bear great potential for radical progress in equality and human rights across the world.