

WOMEN, SEXUALITY AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND THE MEDITERRANEAN

**Organized by WWHR - NEW WAYS
Istanbul, Sept. 28 – 30, 2001**

PRESS STATEMENT

Nineteen women, academicians, representatives of NGOs and international organizations, from Algeria, Egypt, France, Lebanon, Morocco, Pakistan, Palestine, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, and Yemen gathered in Istanbul between September 28 and 30, 2001 for a conference on “**Women, Sexuality and Social Change in the Middle East and the Mediterranean**” organized by Women for Women’s Human Rights (WWHR) – NEW WAYS.

Using their experience and the results of research conducted in their countries, participants confronted some of the pressing issues that directly affect the lives of women in this region, such as:

- links between sexuality and the politics of power
- virginity
- laws and sexuality
- sexual harassment
- violence against women
- honor crimes
- female genital mutilation
- sexual norms, values and behaviors of men and women
- freedom of mobility
- reproductive and sexual health and human rights
- desire and pleasure
- political movements and sexuality

Participants called for the recognition of the right of individuals, women and men, to enjoy a sexual life in accordance with their values and with respect for others. This entails not only the right to determine one’s sexual behavior, but also the right to seek sexual pleasure.

Sexuality is not only a personal and private issue, but it is also linked to systems of power politics and domination in society. Means to control sexuality are institutionalized not only in cultural and social norms and customs, but also in legal policy and practice. For instance, various legal systems sanction crimes committed against women, such as early and forced marriage, virginity tests, discriminatory divorce laws, female genital mutilation, and even reduction of sentence for murders committed in the name of “family honor”.

Participants felt that during periods of militarization and war, oppression of sexuality is exacerbated, because such systems promote rigid notions of masculinity and femininity and perpetuate a culture of aggression and intolerance. Peace is not just the absence of conflict; it is a state of equality and social justice.

Signatories

Dr. Ahlem Belhadj, Association Tunisienne des Femmes Democrats (ATFD)-TUNISIA • Aida Touma Sliman, Women Against Violence (WAV), PALESTINE • Amal Basha, Sisters Arabic Forum for Human Rights, YEMEN • Canan Arın, The Purple Roof Foundation, TURKEY • Caroline Brac de la Perrier, NEW WAYS - International Alliance for Social Innovation • Christine Buttin, NEW WAYS - International Alliance for Social Innovation • Prof. Evelyne Accad, LEBANON • Istanbul Bar Association Women's Rights Enforcement Center, TURKEY • Leila Hessini, ALGERIA • Dr. Leyla Gülçür, TURKEY • Dr. Margot Badran, EGYPT / USA • Prof. Marie Therese Khair Badawi, Bahithat (Lebanese Association of Women Researchers (LAWR), LEBANON • Dr. Nadera Shalhoub Kevorkian, Women's Center for Legal Aid and Counseling (WCLAC), PALESTINE • Najia El Boudali, MOROCCO • Nawal Yaziji, SYRIA • NEW WAYS - International Alliance for Social Innovation • Pinar Ilkcaracan, Women for Women's Human Rights (WWHR) – NEW WAYS, TURKEY, • Shazia Premjee, Aahung, PAKISTAN • Women for Women's Human Rights, Turkey • Zoya Rouhana, Lebanese Council to Resist Violence Against Women, LEBANON