

# AMANA

Vol.1 Issue.3, Third Quarter 2007

magazine

## Women building peace

Writing for empowerment  
in Indonesia

Afghanistan's  
long road to equality

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From the Editor ...

## Women building peace

From grassroots activists to religious figures and political leaders, women across Asia want peace. But too often their contribution is overlooked. In this issue of AMANA Magazine, we turn the spotlight on progressive women and their inspiring peace work.

Continuing our aim of providing a forum for progressive writers and scholars, we have contributions from the likes of Muslim feminist Sharifah Zuriah Aljeffri. We also cover a remarkable Indonesian women's writing group (page 6) and have a striking collection of images from the recent Women's Eye on Peace exhibition, including our cover photo. A selection of these images begins on page 8.

Of course, not all the news is optimistic. In features on the murders of female journalists in Afghanistan (page 5) and the struggle for reform in Iran (page 13), we examine the high costs facing some peace activists.

I hope you enjoy this latest AMANA Magazine, and I look forward to hearing your feedback. If you have not yet done so, you can sign up as an Amana Media Initiative member and find out much more about our work on our website.

[www.arf-asia.org/amana](http://www.arf-asia.org/amana)



**Ian Gould**  
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## AMANA Magazine

AMANA Magazine is published by the Amana Media Initiative (Amana) and is part of the AMAN program 'Peace Actions in Asia', funded by Action Aid. Issued every quarter, AMANA Magazine is circulated across Asia in five languages: English, Bahasa Indonesia, Bengali, Thai and Urdu.

The views expressed by writers in this publication are not necessarily those of Amana, AMAN or ARF.

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Vol.1 Issue.3 – Third Quarter  
Published July 2007

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**Design & layout:** Errin Fawcett  
**Printers:** Quality Graphic House Co. Ltd. (Thailand), Penerbit & Percetakan LKiS (Indonesia), Digital Graphics (India), Ray Printers Ltd. (Bangladesh)

**COVER:** Ness, Bangladesh  
**PHOTO:** Emily Hart, IWDA Women's Eye on Peace exhibition

**OTHER PHOTOS:** Page 5 - RAWA.org, page 6 - helvytr.multiply.com, page 7 - Peter Davis/AusAID, page 10 - Vitaly Duplich/Rossiya TV, page 12 - [www.jordanpanorama.com](http://www.jordanpanorama.com), page 13 - Amnesty International

**Deadline submissions next quarter:** 24 August 2007

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# Reclaiming Islam's message of equality

Muslim women should embrace their faith's spirit of equality and empowerment, writes Sharifah Zuriah Aljeffri.



Sharifah Zuriah Aljeffri

Time and time again, Islam has been used to deny women the basic right to a life of dignity, equality and justice. Yet it is not Islam that oppresses women and sanctions violence, but rather narrow interpretations of the Qur'an influenced mostly by socio-cultural prejudices.

Islam has uplifted the status of women and given them rights that were considered revolutionary. Prior to the advent of Islam, women were treated as mere chattels. They were considered inferior to men and had no rights to education, inheritance and work. The Qur'an granted women equality and human dignity. They had the right to seek education, work, own property and divorce. However, over the centuries, women have often been excluded from participating in public life.

Now, Muslim women social activists and scholars are reclaiming the right to speak up that was given to them over 14 centuries ago. We must look to the Qur'an and discover for ourselves the spirit of equality, justice and compassion so instantly enjoined by it.

Today there are many Muslim women's groups involved in discussing their role in society and the changes they want to make. They are reinterpreting the Qur'an through their eyes and experiences instead of reading interpretations written by men who have misinterpreted the message of equality and justice. An example is Dr Laleh Bakhtiar, an Iranian-American scholar who recently completed a progressive translation of the Qur'an.

Women form half of the world's population and many have been denied the right to speak or be consulted on matters that affect them most. Take for instance wars around the world: the invasion of Iraq by the United States and its allies, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, wars in Africa. Those who suffer most are women and children. Rape

and other forms of sexual torture are used as weapons and strategies of war in order to bring shame to the victims, families and communities. In listing casualties or those missing in action during war, women and children are ignored. Their names are not usually listed in war reports.

In Islam it is wrong to kill or torture women and children during war. In Islam one does not go to war or attack another sovereign state unless it is for self-defence. A number of women's groups have formed to fight extremism and war and promote peace and security, such as Women in Black and the Coalition of Women for Peace.

They demonstrate peacefully and hold vigils in their respective countries, urging governments to end war and discrimination against women. Muslim and Buddhist women in Thailand have organised interfaith dialogue through spirituality for social justice and peace. In Malaysia, Sisters in Islam and other women's groups have formed a Joint Action Group to protest against violence and discrimination against women.

In 2003, a woman was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Her name is Shirin Ebadi, an Iranian lawyer and human rights activist and the first Muslim woman to win the honour. In her acceptance speech, Ebadi said "To disregard women and bar them from active participation in political, social, economic and cultural life is tantamount to depriving the entire population of every society of half its capability. The patriarchal culture and the discrimination against women, particularly in Islamic countries, cannot continue."

Women have special qualities. They are nurturers, caregivers, compassionate and understanding. Women have so much to give and to contribute to a peaceful world. The problem is that women's participation has so often been ignored. Studies have shown that women lead by means of reconciliation and persuasion. Reconciliation unites while confrontation destroys. It is high time for all women to claim the rights and voice they deserve.

*Sharifah Zuriah Aljeffri is a leading Malaysian social activist and artist and a founding member of Muslim feminist organisation Sisters in Islam.*

# Indian Muslims speak out for rights and tolerance

Despite distortions by some religious leaders, Islamic principles strongly support women's rights, as a recent workshop in India showed.

Qutub Jehan Kidwai reports.

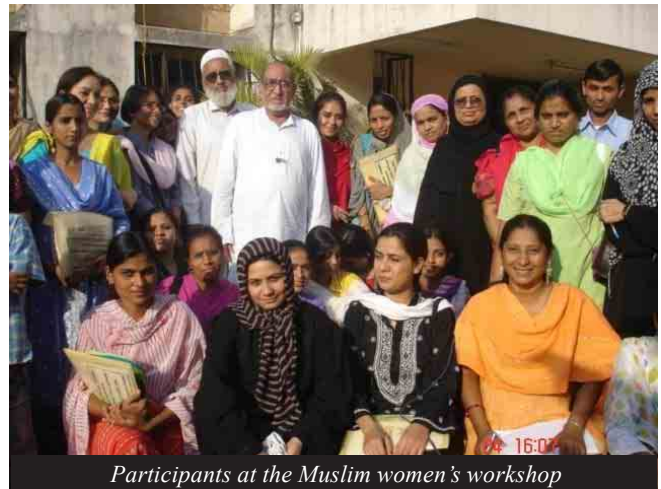
**D**oes the Qur'an discriminate against women? This is what participants ask in every workshop we conduct for Muslim women, and the recent "Rights of Muslim Women in the Qur'an – Theory and Practice" was no exception. The Institute of Islamic Studies in Mumbai hosted the workshop from 1 to 3 June, inviting activists, NGO representatives and individuals in the hope of empowering Muslim women.

The workshop was an interactive one, with participants leading discussions, raising queries and sharing their experiences about working with women at the grassroots level. Leading the event were eminent scholars such as AMAN Chairman Dr Asghar Ali Engineer, Mufti Mohammed Inamullah Khan and activist Neelofer Akhtar.

Subjects covered included the position of women in Islam, women's rights and Islam, and freedom of expression. And, as expected, concerns were raised about whether Islam considered women equal. Many Indian Muslims look to Sharia law for guidance on personal issues such as marriage, divorce, custody of children and inheritance. But many Indian Muslims are still not aware that the so-called Personal Law (*ahwal al shaksiya*) in fact dates only from the period of British rule in India.

The Muslim masses remained under the influence of religious leaders who, being ignorant of the true direction of Sharia law, kept on transmitting false notions and misconceptions to other Muslims through their religious decrees, or *fatwa*. Today, Muslim women in India are fighting against the practice of polygamy and triple divorce (*talaq-e-bidda*), where a husband divorces his wife by pronouncing the word *talaq* three times in one sitting. Such a *talaq* is considered valid even if it is pronounced in the state of anger or inebriation.

Women in the Institute of Islamic Studies training program are educated and empowered to tackle these issues by understanding the principles of the Qur'an and by reforming existing customs. Spiritual equality, responsibility and accountability for both men and women are well-developed themes in the Qur'an.



Participants at the Muslim women's workshop

Many participants are surprised to learn of Qur'anic verses that support gender equality. The recent workshop discussed women's rights in the Qur'an in detail. Entire societies have mistreated their female members despite the fact that Islam calls for women to be honoured and empowered in all spheres of life.

Under Islamic law, women are equal to their male counterparts. They are as liable for their actions as men are liable. Women's testimony is demanded and valid in court. Women's opinions are sought and acted upon. Unfortunately, the promotion of negativity against women has led many Islamic religious leaders to manufacture *fatwa* that suppress women.

In our workshops, Muslim women are encouraged to seek the reform or removal of discriminatory practices. The participants are empowered by training them how to understand the Qur'an on particular issues. This helps them engage in dialogue with their local Imam and encourages them to voice their concern and vehemently denounce *fatwa* and other practices that are un-Islamic and unjust.

**Related story - page 14: Indian women act on violence**

*Qutub Jehan Kidwai is a member of the Institute of Islamic Studies in Mumbai.*

# The high price of equality

A series of recent murders of female journalists shows how far Afghanistan has to go on women's rights. Syed Anwer reports.

When the Taliban fell in Afghanistan in 2001, the international community was quick to make promises about the war-torn nation. Human rights and democracy would be upheld, with Afghan women – severely repressed under the ousted regime – among the major beneficiaries. More than five years on, a marked gap remains between international human rights standards and the realities of life in Afghanistan. Human rights equality continues to elude women in particular.

The recent murder of three prominent female journalists in Afghanistan has highlighted the extent of inequality. In early June, one of Afghanistan's leading independent media figures, Zakia Zaki, was gunned down in her home in Parwan province, north of the national capital Kabul.

Zaki, the head of a respected peace radio program and a regular critic of Afghanistan's warlords, was murdered in front of her two-year-old son, according to reports. As a presenter on one of the few Afghan radio stations broadcasting on women's rights, Zaki was a major voice for equality but also a prominent target for conservatives. She was reportedly banned by some religious leaders from interviewing women for broadcasts and had received several death threats.

Zaki's murder came about a week after that of Kabul television broadcaster Shakiba Sanga Amaj. According to police, the broadcaster, in her 20s, was shot at her home in Kabul by two male relatives. The killings echoed the 2005 murder of another female journalist, Shaima Rezayee, who was also shot in Kabul.

Afghan and international rights groups have condemned the continuing violence against reporters. Journalists in Afghanistan face increasing pressure and threats for doing their jobs, mainly from government authorities and regional warlords. It has become very challenging for journalists to report objectively, the Afghanistan Independent Journalists' Association (AIJA) said in Kabul recently.

Afghan journalist groups have urged the government to adopt measures to ensure the safety of the community and have

criticised the government for its failure in protecting journalists from being harassed, kidnapped and killed. There have been about 40 cases of violence against journalists reported in the past eight months, including killing, beating and imprisonments. In 2004, there were only 15 cases of violence, while in 2005 the number of cases reached 30 across the country. Lobby group the International Federation of Journalists said Zakia Zaki's murder was a direct attack on

Afghan women's rights. "Something must be done to curb the violence plaguing journalists in Afghanistan, and particularly female journalists," IFJ Asia-Pacific director Jacqueline Park said.

"The country's situation is never going to improve if the government does not take steps to ensure the people who would commit such crimes are punished appropriately. The government of Afghanistan needs to clarify

that they support freedom of expression, which includes media outlets that are not afraid to broadcast controversial opinions."

Elsewhere, Afghan women still face systematic discrimination in areas such as marriage and educational opportunities. Marriage often means coercion and abuse. Violence against women, in the form of forced marriages, underage marriage, rape and so-called "honour" killings continue to grow, according to human rights organisations.

Education – named a worldwide right in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights – is also out of reach for some Afghan girls and women. Under the Taliban, Afghanistan was the world's leading example of the breakdown of education provision to children when the regime imposed a ban on schooling for girls. The situation has improved, but there is a long way to go.

In the lead-up to the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights next year, Afghanistan's government and the international community need to do much more for the country's women and girls.

*Syed Anwer is an Afghan journalist and Amana Media Initiative Editorial Team member working in Kabul.*



*Women at a recent protest in Afghanistan call for gender equality*

# Telling their own stories

An inspiring Indonesian writing group is giving women a greater voice, write Mohammad Iqbal Ahnaf and Latifah.

In 1997, Indonesian writers Helvy Tiana Rosa, Asma Nadia, and Maimon Herawati were looking for a way to improve young people's writing skills and access to the media. In February that year, the three Muslim women formed Forum Lingkar Pena (FLP), or Pen Circle Forum, at Jakarta's University of Indonesia.

Back then, the three founders were not focusing only on female empowerment, but they soon realised they could promote women's cause. The fundamental values of Islam arguably promote and honour the position of women in society. However, many interpretations of Islamic texts and practices of many Muslim societies contradict the principles of gender equality and justice. Islam is often misunderstood as a theological source of oppression against women.

FLP's founders showed that Islam and women's empowerment were not mutually exclusive. The writing group soon became a phenomenon in the Indonesian literary world. In a relatively short time, the organisation had established branches in nearly 30 provinces and subsections in more than 100 cities. It also set up international branches in Hong Kong, Singapore, Japan, Egypt, and Europe. Having recently celebrated its 10th anniversary, FLP now has about 5,000 members, 70 percent of whom are women.

As women have come to dominate its membership, it has played a significant role in empowering young Muslim women, a segment of society that is always a potential victim of discrimination. Even though FLP does not explicitly state its goal to champion women's rights, it has nonetheless given Muslim women a powerful voice through writing.

FLP holds workshops and training sessions for members and also links women writers with some of Indonesia's largest publishing houses. Since 1999, major publisher Mizan has published over 100 Islamic fiction titles, including some works from FLP members. Many of these texts focus on personal and public conduct, showing how Islamic values can guide people's lives.

As they sharpen their literary skills, FLP members become active, critical and progressive. They also raise awareness that young Muslim women can be active and need not be objectified. FLP helps women speak, not only hear. In this way, it empowers women with an alternative participatory education. Through FLP, women organise themselves to



*FLP co-founder Helvy Tiana Rosa: promoting women's rights*

develop their writing and reading skills, an answer to male voices in the literary world.

Indonesian migrant workers and FLP members in Hong Kong, Wina Karnie, Syifa Aulia, and Swastika Mahartika, attest to the organisation's influence. "Writing and producing literary work made us feel more valuable," they say. Last year, in a Hong Kong mosque, they launched short stories they wrote as part of FLP.

Despite these successes, FLP still faces a major challenge: how to encourage young Muslim women to critique interpretations of Islam that discriminate against them. But FLP believes it can meet this challenge, using openness and critical thinking to foster moderation.

The fact that many of FLP's members come from an Islamic background can be a bridge between Muslim and other communities. Such a bridge is particularly important at the current time, when the gap between conservatives and liberals seems to be widening. The interaction between these groups through FLP can help reduce unhealthy misunderstanding and prejudice. The interaction at FLP, which is not only academic, but also personal, gives space for communication between Muslims from all backgrounds.

Another force of moderation comes from the FLP's interaction with the market and book buyers. FLP members think twice about radical or xenophobic writing as they want to widen their readership. FLP does not seek out Islamic publishers only; it is also pursuing general and even Christian publishing houses. There is no concern that FLP will be a medium for fundamentalist Muslims, as some people suspect. The openness of FLP and its writers enables them to follow a moderate path.

*Mohammad Iqbal Ahnaf is AMANA Magazine's Indonesia country coordinator and a faculty member of the Centre for Religious and Cross-cultural Studies at Gadjah Mada University, Yogyakarta. Latifah is a student at the Centre.*



# Aceh rises to the challenge

Traditionally denied political power, Aceh's women are becoming empowered as they seek lasting peace. Analysis from UNIFEM East and South-East Asia.

**W**hen the Indonesian government and the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) signed a peace agreement in August 2005, hopes were high for a lasting reprieve after 30 years of conflict in the northern Indonesian province. And Aceh's women were among those most determined for stability.

Women in Aceh want peace. For them, peace means freedom - freedom to farm, to do business, to travel and to work. Women have been strongly affected by conflict. Unfortunately, the women of Aceh were largely overlooked during the negotiations leading to the signing of the peace agreement.

In the most recent conflict, women and children were often most affected and displaced. During the GAM independence push, many women performed duties at the frontline, while others campaigned to support the cause. Yet there is no reference to either gender or women in the peace accord.

Under the Aceh peace agreement, compensation is promised for 3,000 ex-combatants, 2,000 released political prisoners and 25,000 conflict-affected civilians. No assistance has been specifically targeted to former female combatants by either the Indonesian government or GAM.

Women and girls in Aceh face major constraints coping with post-conflict life, such as recovery from the trauma of war-related sexual violence, lack of land and property rights and lack of access to and control of economic resources. In 2006, there were about 100 reported cases of violence against women during conflict and post-conflict. Many people in Aceh think that it is not "women's business" to participate in discussions and decision-making related to politics and society.

Women's exclusion from discussions on post-conflict issues is therefore not deemed a serious concern. Institutions mandated to implement provisions of the 2005 peace agreement are not

convinced of the importance of recognising women's rights as human rights. Only a few women's NGOs have been able to engage in discussions about the peace deal. Unlike their male counterparts, women activists are often unable to devote themselves full-time to the cause as they find themselves solely responsible for running the household and caring for children and the elderly.

In 2000, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security, the first such instrument looking specifically at the impact of conflict on women and their contribution to peace. In 2005, drawing on the spirit of Resolution 1325, UNIFEM supported the Second All Acehese Women's Congress. Over 400 women from all walks of life proposed an alternative blueprint for the rehabilitation and reconstruction of Aceh, in which women's representation and participation are central to the rebuilding process.

Since then, several Acehese NGOs have been active in building the capacity of women. One example is the Aceh Women's League, or LINA. It has conducted a series of training sessions for women to raise awareness of political and socio-economic rights. In addition, LINA has trained over 200 women in computer and English language skills. LINA is working towards a model of post-conflict community where women take the role of educators and advocates for a culture of peace.

UNIFEM is supporting this work and running programs targeting women's rights, female leadership and access to livelihood. Future plans include women's participation in the electoral process due in 2009, and gender-inclusive democratic governance. It is hoped that these programs will empower Aceh's women and contribute to lasting stability in Indonesia and the region.

*UNIFEM, the United Nations Development Fund for Women, promotes women's empowerment. For more information on its work in East and South-East Asia visit [www.unifem-eseasia.org](http://www.unifem-eseasia.org).*



**Left:** Australian Muslim woman Toltu Tufa is determined to improve community understanding of her faith and culture. She says women from all backgrounds can play a key part in building sustainable peace.

**Photo:** Julie Bowyer

# Peace through

As female politicians and activists campaign for peace, it is easy to forget the impact of less high-profile women. But as this selection of striking images from the recent Women's Eye on Peace exhibition shows, women across the Asia-Pacific region are making their mark.



**Above:** Laughter brings peace to this group of women in central Vietnam.  
**Photo:** Amanda Donovan

**Right:** The quiet dignity of this young Tibetan woman contrasts with the dispute over her homeland's status.  
**Photo:** Katherine Morton





**Right:** Like millions of other children around the world, Tibetans Drolma and Tashito have limited access to education and healthcare, but find peace of mind in their enduring friendship.

**Photo:** Katherine Morton



# women's eyes

The images were exhibited in Australia as an initiative of the International Women's Development Agency (IWDA). Images are available for purchase at [www.iwda.org.au](http://www.iwda.org.au), with proceeds funding women building peace in Fiji and other IWDA projects.



**Left:** This Indian mother and her daughter are a vision of peace as they chat and play happily.

**Photo:** Emma Stone

# Visions of harmony



*Dinara Sadretdinova, right, with Muslims producer Vasily Antipov*

As presenter of Russian television program *Muslims*, Dinara Sadretdinova is proudly building understanding of the Islamic world. Exclusive interview for AMANA Magazine by RIA Novosti.

**AMANA Magazine:** *What is your program about and what is its aim?*

**Dinara Sadretdinova:** The back wall of our studio displays an extract from the Qur'an: "We have created you of one man and one woman, and made you into nations and tribes that you may know each other." Most of our shows tell the audience about Muslim people's culture and traditions, festivals, cooking and so on. Our main aim is to present Islam through the prism of a particular person's life and that of his family and friends.

In fact, *Muslims* is not really a religious program at all. It's for the cultural education of the public. On our weekly shows we talk about Muslim history and ethnic traditions, and profile a range of people from the Muslim community – teachers, doctors, scholars, athletes and others. Islam is what brings them together.

**AM:** *How did you become presenter of the program?*

**DS:** I was born in Moscow of Tatar ethnic heritage, and grew up as an atheist. After finishing school, I enrolled in the Russian Academy of Theatre Arts. To be a television presenter was my dream as a little girl. I thought I could take up acting just as well as I could anything else and I believed such education would come in handy.

My parents were very pious, and I owe my first glimpses of religion to them. But back then, ethnic traditions were more precious to us than Islam. That's the case with many Tatars. Nailya, my elder sister, was who converted me. She was the first practising Muslim in the family. And she made me realise what faith meant. I slowly became more

pious. Now, at the age of 32, I don't think I could live without my religion.

**AM:** *Why makes faith so important to you?*

**DS:** I felt I needed prayer as much as the air I breathed before starting my last year at the Academy. I knew then I could not go on living the way I had been. I spent my summer vacation at a Muslim women's camp, where I learned to say my daily prayers. My life changed beyond recognition.

I was uncertain about what to do after the Academy until one day I received a godsend. A friend offered me a job at a satellite television channel that had a religious program. But it closed soon after I joined the crew.

Then my sister Nailya met Yelena Korshak, director of major Russian television channel Rossiya. They met by coincidence at a Moscow mosque, where Yelena's crew was looking for a concept for a program about Muslims. That was when I was invited to work for the new program. I jumped at the chance, though I knew what a responsible job it would be.

**AM:** *How do you think your program influences relations between Muslims and non-Muslims?*

**DS:** The program is meant for everyone, Muslims and non-Muslims alike. The broad view we take works - audiences send in lots of letters. I see religion as a uniting force. Islam calls believers to be at peace with their neighbors and respect them.

*RIA Novosti is a leading Russian news and information agency. For more information visit <http://en.rian.ru>*

# A pioneer for peace

Bhikkhuni Dhammananda dismissed conservative opposition to become one of a handful of Thai female monks. The Nobel Prize nominee tells Fareeda Kajudmarn why women are the key to social harmony.

As a child, the Venerable Bhikkhuni Dhammananda had every reason to follow a spiritual path. As the only daughter of the Venerable Bhikkhuni Voramai Kabilsingh, Thailand's first female monk, Dhammananda was exposed from the beginning to female religious empowerment. Her mother was instrumental in bringing Buddhist education to Thai women, overcoming criticism from male conservatives.

Despite this powerful example, Dhammananda at first chose a different path. She put her energy into academia and eventually became professor of philosophy and religion at Bangkok's Thammasat University. But as she built her academic career, she came to realise she could do her best work in a different field. By the early 1990s she was more sure of what she needed to do. By 2001, Dhammananda had emulated her mother, becoming a female monk following an ordination in Sri Lanka.

"I was not only motivated by my mother. The decision to be ordained also came from me," Dhammananda told *AMANA Magazine* at her temple in Nakhon Prathom province, near Bangkok. "I gave up completely what I was used to as a layperson. It was like if you receive the call from God in Islam and Christianity."

From the outset, Dhammananda was determined to set a precedent for women. As one of a handful of female monks in Thailand, Dhammananda, now in her early 60s, has faced strong resistance from religious conservatives. Unlike her male counterparts, she had to leave Thailand to become a monk – there was no female monk to ordain her in her home country.

"It is a challenge in Thailand because there has never been ordination for female monks here, so I went to receive [low] ordination in Sri Lanka in 2001," Dhammananda said. She received full ordination in 2003. When her mother passed away in her 90s in 2003, Dhammananda decided to open her temple to women and men, Buddhist and non-Buddhist, to continue her mother's example of spiritual

nourishment. Apart from building understanding of female monks and their ordination, Dhammananda and her colleagues set up social and education programs for women and children, including underprivileged communities.

"We try to approach women and children by building a relationship between the temple and the community. For example, we give lessons about Buddhism in English to children on Sunday. We also teach meditation to visitors," she says.

International recognition of Dhammananda's work came in 2005, when she was one of 1,000 women around the world nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. Dhammananda and her counterparts did not win the accolade, but the experience was a rich inspiration.

"I realised that many women were fighting for peace and equality in education, equal access to resources and so on. I think we can bring about peace together," she said, encouraging others to take up the challenge. "You have to be peaceful and calm and get involved."



*Personifying peace: Bhikkuni Dhammananda*

Despite misunderstanding of female monks and their work, and opposition to female ordination from conservatives, Dhammananda is not deterred. She strongly believes in gender equality in Buddhism, and is confident she can uphold her mother's legacy.

"It's no good to fight with anyone. I just continue my responsibility to share the lessons of Buddhism," she said. "I agree with His Holiness the Dalai Lama that we can find peace in the end, but that we can't achieve it through violence, even if we have to wait a long time to get there."

*Fareeda Kajudmarn is the Amana Media Initiative's Editorial Assistant.*

# Looking ahead in the Middle East



Peace work is high on the agenda as women take a more active role in some Arab societies, reports Dr Maha Mubaidyn.

**F**rom an Islamic point of view, women are a source of peace and a key part of the stable state. Today, with conflict in parts of the Arab world, women can make a major difference on the path to peace. In the conflicts in the Palestinian territories and Iraq, women are playing a major role in efforts to seek peace. They have helped build refugee camps, trying to plant seeds of peace far from violence.

We have seen major examples of women working for peace in the Middle East in recent times. If we contemplate women in the Arab World now, we see that more and more frequently women are pushing for social and political involvement, while not abandoning their role as mothers and wives.

In Iraq, we saw how the journalist Atwar Bahjat, murdered while reporting in early 2006, accomplished her role with complete dedication, and paid with her life for the sake of patriotic and professional duty. Peace activist Dr Hanan Ashrawi was an effective element in Palestinian-Israeli negotiations, then was a member of the Palestinian National Authority government.

Statistics suggest women's participation in some Arab societies is growing. In Algeria, for example, women are taking a greater role in the professions and even politics. About 70 percent of Algeria's lawyers and 60 percent of its judges are female, *The New York Times*

reported. Most doctors are women and an estimated 60 percent of university students are female.

Women in Algeria still only make up 20 percent of the workforce, and men hold most political power, but there are signs things are changing in the north African nation as women seek more involvement in society and politics.

"If such a trend continues, we will see a new phenomenon where our public administration will also be controlled by women." Daho Djerbal, editor of Algerian social analysis magazine *Naqd*, told *The New York Times*.

As Algeria recovers from a civil war that killed at least 100,000 and most citizens reject extremist Islamic ideology, women are proving instrumental to social progress. "Women, and the women's movement, could be leading us to modernity," University of Algiers professor Abdel Nasser Djabi said.

Of course, not all Arab countries are as open to female empowerment. But as women's role in Middle Eastern societies develops, they will show the enlightenment that lies at the heart of progressive Islam and help build lasting peace.

*Dr Maha Mubaidyn is a women's rights activist and academic at Al al-Bayt University in Jordan.*

*Article translated by Samir Hamarneh.*

# Discrimination and defiance for Iran's rights activists

Widespread inequality and repression have only made Iran's women's rights activists more determined. Report from Amnesty International and Rooz Online.

**W**hen Iranian activist Zeinab Peighambarzadeh was imprisoned earlier this year, she sent an unmistakable message to the country's conservative government. Peighambarzadeh remained defiant about her involvement in the Change for Equality campaign, becoming the latest of several activists to be jailed for supporting the national women's rights movement.

Peighambarzadeh has since been released, and the struggle for women's equality in Iran continues. This August will mark the first anniversary of Iran's Change for Equality campaign, in which activists are trying to collect one million signatures and reform their country's discriminatory laws. In June 2006, a group of Iranian women activists held a peaceful protest in the capital Teheran, inspiring fellow rights advocates to launch the signatures campaign last August.

The campaign is trying to increase women's political participation in a country where they are often considered second-class citizens. Iranian laws are weighted heavily against women. Criminal harm suffered by a woman is less severely punished than that suffered by a man, according to human rights organisation Amnesty International.

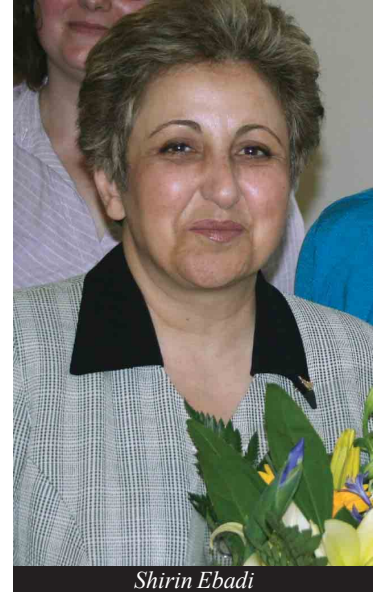
Evidence given by women in court has half the value of that of a man. Although the legal age for marriage is 13, fathers can apply for permission to arrange that their daughters are married earlier – for example, to men much older than their daughters.

The Change for Equality campaign's website ([www.we-change.org](http://www.we-change.org)) went live on the day of the campaign launch last August. There are currently several thousand signatories, as volunteers travel around Iran promoting the campaign and informing women about their rights.

The reform efforts have angered religious reactionaries and Iran's conservative government. In March this year, a group of women gathered outside the Revolutionary Court in Teheran to protest peacefully about the trial of five women charged in connection with the demonstration held last June,

Amnesty International reported. The National Security Police arrested about 30 protesters.

Some of the women later claimed being blindfolded and interrogated by security forces. All but two of the women were released without charge later that month, although they may face charges at a later date. The remaining two activists were released on bail in March. They could face trial in the future.



*Shirin Ebadi*

The women's reform movement has won the support of Iranian lawyer and activist Shirin Ebadi, who in 2003 became the first Muslim woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize. In an interview in May with Iranian news website Rooz Online, Ebadi lambasted the crackdown on the rights campaign.

“It should be noted that the charges against [the female protesters] are listed as ‘actions against national security’. While this term is incomprehensible by law, the question is how can people who request the parliament and other formal government agencies to make changes to certain existing laws be considered similar to ‘overthrowing’ a government?” Ebadi said.

“The judiciary is doing everything it can to pressure these women as much as possible by ignoring existing rules and regulations, which are all aimed at preventing other women from demanding their rights. These practices prove the proverbial notion that ‘when politics enters the court through a door, justice leaves it through a window’.”

As the authorities persist with attempts to stop protests, Iranian women are still signing up to the Change for Equality campaign. The high profile of the movement and the support of Shirin Ebadi and human rights organisations suggest that the struggle for gender equality in Iran will only grow stronger.

*Read the full Amnesty International report at <http://www.amnesty.org/actnow>*

# Indian women act on violence

A group of Indian women and their supporters from gender equity network Jivika take on a national scourge in this opinion statement.

**A**s horrific tales of sexual violence against women and girls in the Indian state of West Bengal and elsewhere emerge in the media (Gujarat, Manipur and Kalinganagar in Orissa are some of the most glaring examples), with reports that the attacks are perpetrated by military, police and hoodlums of the political parties, we have been asking ourselves the simple question: “Why?”

Why has violence against women in the most unspeakable forms become part and parcel of political conflicts? In fact this question arises again and again in the recent history of political violence in India. The Committee Against Violence On Women (CAVOW) recently reported the rape of eight women in Bastar, central India, by uniformed police personnel. The women had been protesting against forcible land acquisition for industry.

The question “why?” can be asked and answered in a variety of ways. What is clear is that these instances of violence against women are occurring in the context of an aggressive expansive thrust of Indian capitalism, seeking hegemonic status in the global arena.

The areas in which this violence has occurred are often linked to investors, witnessing a political clash between unscrupulous economic development and resistance to it. While these are the most egregious examples of violence against women in political conflicts, there are also other forms of violence against women, which are widespread and invisible. Family or domestic violence includes, for example, the violence of traditional practices and foeticide, infanticide, forced/early marriage, forced sex-work, wife battering, and violence against widows.

Violence at the community level includes caste-based violence, body mutilation, so-called “honour killings”, abduction, rape and other forms of sexual violence, sexual harassment and workplace violence, and trafficking. A recent example was the public beating, rape and mutilation of the sexual organs of women from a *Dalit* (backward/down-trodden) family at Khairlanji, central India.

All forms of gender-based violence against women and children violate their human rights and are political, involving power and patriarchal domination. The common thread in these diverse forms of violence is social and gender-based domination that makes violence against women acceptable in family and community contexts.

After economic liberalisation, the focus on women is increasingly as a cheap labour force. Despite apparently

positive indicators of progress, particularly in education and paid employment, the position of women has changed little. Studies suggest that while there is an increase in low-wage employment and self-employment, gender discrimination is being reinforced.

While microcredit is a necessary but insufficient condition to address poverty, evidence suggests that the burden of its access and repayment falls entirely on the shoulders of women. Notions of “family honour” are being reworked so that women must bear the brunt of family survival strategies through credit and increased workload, while financial players reap the benefits of reduced transaction costs.

Even more worrying are the increasingly reported instances of sexual harassment and assault on women at workplaces. In this context, the liberating and empowering effect of the workplace has only partially materialised. Without losing sight of its intrinsic links with all forms of gender-based violence, we would like to focus attention on the violence against women indulged in by state agencies and political actors.

All politics, regardless of ideology, is ostensibly about making a better world. Political activity draws upon the thoughts and aspirations of people for a better life. Violence against women can never be countenanced by the political imagination as a means to a noble end. Yet such violence persists because of the patriarchal view of women as chattel, as “territory” to be conquered, as “honour” to be saved or violated.

What seems to emerge clearly from the examples we have cited is that whether it is politics of the Right or of the Left, of the hegemonic or of oppressed groups, of neo-liberalism or of the resistance, certain essentialist notions of masculine and feminine with their roots in patriarchy seem to regularly result in sexual violence against women as a “legitimate” form of conflict.

As neo-liberal economies take root, we fear that gross physical violence against women will only increase. As people who believe in and participate in progressive politics, this is a matter of grave concern to us. We believe that this clandestine indulgence towards violence against women is intolerable. We therefore urge fellow citizens to declare that there is no place in politics for this assault on the bodies and minds of women. This is a precondition for achieving any vision for a better world.

*This statement is an edited product of a discussion on Jivika, an online gender equity network. For more information contact [vlobo\\_1@hotmail.com](mailto:vlobo_1@hotmail.com).*

# Agenda:

## July - September 2007

### >> AMAN / ARF ACTIVITIES

Date	Program	Location	Activity
Jul	Peace and sustainable development	Pattani, Thailand	Peace education in Thailand's three southernmost provinces
Jul 6-8	ARF/ECOT :Community-based training for coastal resource conservation	Phuket, Thailand	Community-based training for coastal resource conservation
Jul 8-14	Youth Coordination Center International (YCCI)	Kathmandu, Nepal	Youth workshop on peace and human rights
Jul 14-16	Islamic Leaders and HIV/AIDS training	Bangkok, Thailand	Building capacity on community
Jul 23-27	Asian human rights activist training	Bangkok, Thailand	Data use and advocacy on rights violence
Aug	ARF/ECOT: Anti-child trafficking	Phuket, Thailand	Child protection workshop

### >> EVENTS IN THE REGION

Jul 5-9	A non-violent path to conflict resolution and peace building	Istanbul, Turkey
Jul 17-19	Islamic Economics Conference (iECONS 2007)	Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Jul 18-20	In Search of Reconciliation and Peace in Indonesia and East Timor conference	Singapore
Jul 23-27	Women and Public Life Conferenc	Damascus, Syria
Jul 23-27	Third International Muslim Leaders' Consultation on HIV/AIDS	Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
Jul 23-27	Interactive Workshop on Multimedia Forensics	Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Aug 2-5	Fifth International Convention of Asia Scholars (ICAS 5)	Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Aug 10	Youth Leaders Summit	Mumbai, India
Aug 17- Sep 25	6th Leadership Course on Gender, Sexuality and Health in South-East Asia and China	Bangkok, Thailand
Aug 19-23	8th International Congress on AIDS in Asia and the Pacific (ICAAP)	Colombo, Sri Lanka
Aug 23-26	Education in Forty Years of Occupation (1967 - 2007) conference	Palestinian Territories
Sep 12-15	The Politics of Post-Conflict Aceh Conference	Naples, Italy

Find more events and detailed information about these activities on the Amana website ([www.arf-asia.org/amana](http://www.arf-asia.org/amana)) or contact a staff member at [arf@arf-asia.org](mailto:arf@arf-asia.org)

# THE AMANA MEDIA INITIATIVE

The Amana Media Initiative (Amana) is a broad-based media project committed to promote greater understanding and peace within Muslim communities, between faiths and among various cultural communities in Asia. Amana means trust, stemming from 'aman', the Arabic word for peace.

Amana was founded in April 2005 by the Asian Resource Foundation (ARF) and the Asian Muslim Action Network (AMAN). The **ARF** supports holistic development by building awareness to mobilize and share resources in order to marginalised groups in Asia. **AMAN** aims to build understanding and solidarity among Muslims and other faith communities in Asia towards people's empowerment, human rights, justice and peace.

With over 1500 members, Amana's network spans Asia and is coordinated from Bangkok, Thailand.

**Publications:** AMANA Magazine, Amana Monthly, Amana Website

**Focus:** Islam, inter-faith partnerships, development initiatives, human rights, gender and peace



Further information about the Amana Media Initiative is available at [www.arf-asia.org/amana](http://www.arf-asia.org/amana)

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