

WASHINGTON REPORT

On Middle East Affairs



The Aurat Foundation: Information Clearing House for Women's Affairs

By Richard H. Curtiss

“The common response to high population pressures, environmental degradation and global poverty smacks of elitism, racism and sexism. The problem is stated loud and clear: poor women, especially of non-white races, are irrational because they continue to have more children, which makes them even poorer...But the fallacy of this approach is that poor women are assigned the major responsibility of solving social and economic problems created primarily by those with wealth and power at the national and international levels. There is now greater awareness worldwide that demographic solutions to the world's population problems cannot be separated from the provision of mass health care services, from women's enhanced social and economic status, and from a more equitable distribution of resources and power.”

By anyone's standards, Pakistan's Aurat Foundation is a major non-governmental organization. With a national staff of 86, of whom 35 are in its national headquarters in Lahore, the foundation also has branches in Islamabad and Karachi.

Because the writer arrived late for a scheduled briefing in Aurat's Lahore headquarters, executive editor Nigar Ahmad already had begun her next meeting. The briefing therefore was begun by Aurat director of information

services Misbah Tahir. Fifteen minutes later, her meeting completed, Mrs. Ahmad smoothly introduced her American journalist and then picked up the briefing like a cog in a well-oiled machine—making sure that the visitor met the organization's educational and publications specialists, its chief artist and layout staff, and had time to ask them questions about their responsibilities as well as their reasons for working in the relatively demanding non-profit field.

In fact Mrs. Ahmad is not just a cog, according to her staff, but the kind of visionary individual and skillful fundraiser who seems to be at the heart of every successful non-governmental or non-profit organization in the world. With a degree in economics from Cambridge University in England and an M.A. earned in Pakistan, she taught for 12 years in Islamabad, gradually becoming involved in women's affairs—an involvement that led directly to the creation in 1986 of Aurat as an information clearing house “for women's empowerment” and whose output is targeted at decision makers and women at all levels of Pakistani society.

The organization's first project, funded by the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), was to network with NGOs in the field of women's development. “We now are in contact with about 2,000 NGOs in Pakistan,” Mrs. Ahmad said. “Being an information organization we collect information for other groups.”

the military government of Gen. Zia ul-Haq “against women and in the name of Islam and which we said were not Islamic,” Mrs. Ahmad explained. “We women had the right to do all kinds of things and we were being relegated to second class in the name of Islam.”

“Initially this movement was confined to upper-middle-class women who had very limited access to the means of getting these ideas into the mainstream,” she continued. “At the beginning this was only a part-time endeavor, and initially we could only react.

“Essentially we felt that we needed a full-time group of professionals and a much larger network for the dissemination of information. We also realized we had to take a much more holistic approach involving the fields of employment, finance, education, environment and technology.

“We realized that it could not be on the basis of only one project. We had to go in for long-term funding from UNICEF and the U.N. Fund for Population, to whom we talked in terms of five-year funding. We wanted to get into the mainstream, so we tried to contact the mainstream media and also work at the community level in both the rural and urban areas.

“Aurat has evolved over the 10 years since it was established and now we see ourselves as essentially an organization for women's empowerment. We see this as women's participation in government requiring women's control of knowledge, resources and institutions. This cannot be done except in a large context for social change.”

Mrs. Ahmad explained that originally her organization saw its role as providing information without direct communication with the NGOs it served. Later, she says, “we saw we needed a dialogue because we needed the information that they had. We saw that you can give information to the women, but what happens to it at the community level? Who is going to assist the women when we are not around?

Aurat therefore has three basic programs. One is to provide information at the community, intermediate and decision-making levels. The second is a training program for intermediary organizations, which includes gender sensitizing. The third is an advocacy program.

Mrs. Ahmad says that in her experience, men at the leadership level are not able to find sufficient arguments to disagree with her organization's goals. “In fact,” she says, “they agree about doing things. But they don't necessarily do them—you have to do a lot of pushing.

“There is much larger awareness that women have to be more actively involved in the development process and that a lot of women are involved in economically productive work,” Mrs. Ahmad says. “Women have achieved public awareness that there is a lot of discriminatory legislation against women. As a result, we can move a little faster now than we could 10 years ago.”

Like leaders of other women's organizations in Pakistan, Mrs. Ahmad admits that “the fact that we have a woman prime minister does provide some space.” But, while unhesitatingly giving Benazir Bhutto credit for leading by example and for specific legislation on women's issues, women activists do not want the women's movement to become identified with any particular individual or party, in order to avoid backsliding when other parties come to power.

At present in Pakistan there are more educational institutions, health services, and employment opportunities—even in the industrial sector—available to women than ever before, Mrs. Ahmad noted. “So long as we don't take part in things that are too controversial, there is space for us.”

Surprisingly, her primary criticism at the moment focuses on Pakistan's media. “We have more of a response from the media than in the past,” she said, “but the media isn't doing even a hundredth of what it could do.”

If that is the case, the Aurat Foundation's own highly professional publications are not at fault. Aurat publishes a reader-friendly quarterly newsletter* that varies from 24 to 60 pages per issue. Normal issues may describe new activities of the foundation, such as preparation of a radio program to reach rural women, or such pertinent

issues as bias against girls in school textbooks, and gender-sensitizing teachers at the community level. A recent special issue was devoted to rural women in Pakistan.

Every issue contains anecdotes and personal case studies selected both for their popular interest and for their dramatization of the problems faced by Pakistani women at all social levels, but particularly rural women, who do a very high percentage of the work but receive far less than an equal share of educational and other benefits. The newsletter, and a stream of booklets, posters and photo exhibits, are published in both Urdu and English and are notable for the professionalism they display. Not only are they carefully laid out and edited, but they are profusely illustrated, thanks to Aurat's publications designers and staff artist.

Each issue of the newsletter credits the United Nations Family Planning Association for funding its documentation and resource center, and UNICEF for funding the newsletter itself. It is hard for a casual visitor to envision the organization as just one of Pakistan's many, tiny, struggling NGOs at the time of its founding 10 years ago. What is clear, however, is what a well-managed NGO consisting of dedicated individuals can do, with proper funding.

The women and men of Aurat are informing and inspiring Pakistan's leaders and public to alleviate the problems of women. By doing so they will overcome perhaps the single biggest impediment to the transition of their country, from a case study in underdevelopment during much of its first half-century of independence, to a major world political and economic player during its next half century.

**Overseas readers wishing an annual subscription to the Aurat quarterly newsletter may subscribe to the English or Urdu version by sending the equivalent of U.S. \$8 in Pakistani rupees (about Rs 250) via bank draft to Aurat Foundation, 4-A LDA Garden View Apartments, Lawrence Road, Lahore 54000, tel. 6360352 or fax 6278817.*