

“In pursuit of Women’s Rights”

The 8th of March is International Women’s Day. An annual day of celebration, commemoration, reflection and focus on women worldwide, a reminder that even in this era of outstanding technological advancement, this world, in many areas, still fails to protect many basic human rights of women. International Women’s Day creates opportunities to give voices to those so often unheard, to expose brutal abuse and highlight inequalities in the workplace and society.

There are twelve-year old girls selling their bodies for money, there are women having their faces and bodies battered not for a shred of provocation and there are those who have been so continually raped by their fathers, brothers, uncles or neighbors, that they do not know any other way of life. Despite the achievements for women in the health and educative sector, the overall situation of women’s rights remains considerably unequal in comparison to men’s rights. According to a UNIFEM report “Progress of the World’s Women” of the year 2005 women still hold only 16% of the parliamentary seats worldwide. Women’s economic opportunities also lie far behind their capabilities. Furthermore, they are remarkably disadvantaged concerning their equal access to natural resources, such as water, land or crops, because many national laws give the right to inheritance over land to male members of the family, but not to female members.

That this still happens in the world in 2009 is an embarrassment to modern-day ‘civilization’. A woman’s right to health, education, safety and security, nutrition and to vote should never need affirmation, it should be a given.

Yemen is under the watchful eyes of the world and attention is being increasingly paid to women’s issues here. The two most recent reasons for this is the case of Nujood and the 2008 Gender Gap Report. The case of Nujood saw the eight-year old Yemeni girl approach the courts on her own to request for a divorce out of a violent, illegal marriage and made news headlines all over the world. The World Economic Forum’s 2008 Gender Gap Report ranked Yemen last out of 130 countries (as having the largest gap) and pointed a disturbing finger at the inequalities between women and men here.

Fortunately, however, more and more local and international organizations have started addressing relevant issues and focal points such as early marital age and poor maternal health are topical today.

One organization, which is taking a huge step in support of women’s rights in Yemen, is GTZ. GTZ (German Technical Cooperation), commissioned by the German government, implements a number of projects in Yemen in the fields of education, health, governance and sustainability and works co-operatively with the Yemeni government. The Social Care House is one of its projects. It was started in Aden in 2003 as a place of safety for female ex-prisoners and female

victims of violence. 'The Social Care House stemmed out of clear necessity', says project manager and political scientist, Nora Pistor. It was the first place of its kind to be established in Yemen and was a pilot project in the whole Arab region. 'About 200-300 women are imprisoned every year in Yemeni jails', says Nora Pistor, 'many are detained without trial and do not get any opportunities to make statements'. Prison life is fraught with the dangers of ill health and threat of rape and is traumatizing to most women. Most heartbreakingly, however, is the response of these women's families to their incarceration. Regardless of whether the woman is innocent or guilty, she is seen as an outcast by her family and therefore, she receives no visits from them during her time in jail and is not able to go back to her family when her time there has elapsed. Outside of prison, she faces a life on the streets and begging and petty crime become desperate options. The vicious cycle is completed when she may be arrested or imprisoned for a second time.

This is where the Social Care House plays its significant role. It is a place that women can go to after they have completed their prison term. The House also accommodates female victims of abuse. A number of women stay in abusive relationships because they simply have nowhere else to go to and opt not to adopt lives on the street. The Social Care House offers these women an alternative place to stay.

According to Nora Pistor, the Social Care House is much more than just a place to stay. 'The House is not a destination', she says, 'it is a transient place of rehabilitation and social reintegration to help make the onward journeys of these women's lives easier and better'.

One of the primary goals of the House is to create dialogue between the women and their families. The women receive therapeutic counseling, are educated about their legal and human rights and are given the freedom to voice their concerns in a non-judgmental and safe environment. They are encouraged to see and speak to their families, with a reunion with them being the ultimate aim. 'This is not an easy process', says Nora Pistor 'sometimes it takes years for the family to accept the woman again.' The statistics however, speak of the massive overall success of the House. Forty-five women have received assistance from the House since its 2003 initiation and eleven are staying there at present.

In addition to being provided with legal and medical attention, the women also receive education and training. This includes advice and support on vocational options, training in sewing and handicrafts and being able to attend literacy and religious programs. Two of the House's current 'inmates' are students at Aden University.

Well-known lawyer and human rights activist Afra Al Hariri is the executive director of the Social Care House and was the driving force behind its establishment. She continues to advocate for these marginalized women and

also receives legal support from The Arab Foundation for Supporting Women and Juveniles (AFSWJ). The AFSWJ, project partner of GTZ on the Social Care House, is an Aden-based NGO that takes up cases of women and juveniles and offers legal and judicial support to them in the Yemeni legal system.

It is quite apparent that the Social Care House is precisely the kind of institution that Yemen needs. It is the kind of institution that chooses reconciliation over division, compassion over judgment and justice over honor. It stands as an example to Yemen that should be duplicated and supported. It clearly shows that as long as there are women who are being raped, slandered, ostracized, beaten, humiliated, there will be other women who will fight, persevere, advocate and stand tall in the pursuit of women's rights.

This International Women's Day we salute all these women.