

Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUWL)

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Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML) is an international solidarity network that provides information, support, and a collective space for women whose lives are shaped, conditioned or governed by laws and customs said to derive from Islam. For more than two decades WLUML has linked individual women and organisations and routinely reaches women in over 110 countries, with networkers based in some 40 countries and communities.

WLUML does not identify itself as a 'Muslim women's organisation', and instead recognises that women affected by Muslim laws are not necessarily always Muslims, and that some born into a Muslim community may have chosen a different marker of political or personal identity.

WLUML's open structure has been designed to maximize participation of diverse and autonomous groups and individuals as well as collective decision-making. WLUML does not have formal membership and networkers are a fluid group of individuals and organisations who maintain regular two-way contact with the network.

The International Coordination Office (ICO) is based in London, UK and has primary responsibility for facilitating coordination between networkers. Regional Coordination Offices are in Pakistan (Asia) and Nigeria (Africa and Middle East) and are responsible for coordinating network activities in their respective regions. Although legally and financially autonomous, they are key components of WLUML.

Since its inception, WLUML has recognized the importance of the circulation of information as a means of establishing networking linkages and reaching out to broad audiences. But whereas some years ago there was very little information available about women's lives in Muslim countries and communities, the mushrooming of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and their rapidly expanding reach along with burgeoning interest in relevant research has meant that WLUML is no longer the sole source of information. WLUML has therefore re-focused the collection and circulation of information, including responding to requests for information, to ensure that the needs of the women linked through the network are placed centre stage. All information related activities comply with UK Data Protection legislation and the privacy and confidentiality of networkers and their information is respected.

WLUML is recognized as an important source of information, solidarity and support at an extraordinary range of levels: by a wide variety of individual women; by activist networkers in Muslim countries and communities; by allies in the feminist and progressive human rights movements. In addition, the wider

public, academics, legal and health professionals, media, governmental, and intergovernmental agencies all expect WLUMML to provide insights and analyses that will strengthen their work, making dynamic information exchanges our lifeblood.

This recognition is based on a number of factors, including WLUMML's linkages with women actively engaged in human rights struggles as well as its significant expertise particularly in the area of the links between religion, culture, custom and law, derived from our collective project, the 1992-2001 Women & Law in the Muslim World action-research Programme.

The ICO collects, analyses, and circulates information regarding women's diverse experiences and strategies in Muslim countries and communities, using a variety of methods and media including printed publications (both regular and occasional). Information activities also involve the pro-active documentation and analysis of trends, experiences and strategies with the aim of strengthening local and international struggles.

Networking is used to link women across the network and link women with the wider feminist and human rights movement as well as provide support for local struggles. Horizontal linkages – i.e. putting women in direct contact with each other rather than centralized linkages through the network coordination offices – are emphasized wherever possible.

Solidarity actions, in the shape of international alerts for action, campaigns and support provided in response to specific appeals (e.g. linking women with legal advice and support institutions), recognize that the provision of concrete support and intervention is vital for the promotion of women's human rights.

Solidarity actions typically involve research on legislation and legal matters; contact with specialized support groups, often in more than one country; directing persons to specialized legal assistance and support; and mobilizing appropriate support for the case. Successful solidarity actions also often depend on the rapid mobilization of local networks of activists and on the strength of alliances that WLUMML builds with other international networks. Because of the sensitive nature of many of these cases, widespread publicity about a case may not necessarily be the most appropriate response – and might even be detrimental. WLUMML therefore carefully studies the circumstances and consults with those requesting solidarity before deciding whether to request public support or to handle the case quietly.

The process of initiating and responding to alerts often requires extensive and time-consuming investigation, follow-up and updates. Launching an alert involves checking the source and facts and contacting networkers inside and outside the region concerned. Alerts are circulated internally to elicit a collective decision on how best to proceed, and to discuss strategies and possible backlash. After acting on the alerts, the ICO continues to follow-up the cases, provides updates and solicits feedback on the effectiveness of the alert. Successful alert actions depend on the rapid mobilization of local networks of activists and on the strength of alliances that WLUMML builds with other international networks.

WLUMML collects, analyses, and circulates information regarding women's diverse experiences and strategies in Muslim contexts using a variety of media. It translates information into and from French, Arabic and English wherever possible. Networking groups also translate information into numerous other languages.

Translations are also an important means of enabling networkers to access feminist debates from other contexts and continue to be a cornerstone of WLUMML's documentation and dissemination activities, feeding into the sharing of alternative analysis. WLUMML recognizes that women activists linked through the network have limited access to publications on women's activism produced by mainstream publishers in the developed countries.

A unique resource for academics and activists alike, WLUMML compiles information about the lives and struggles of women living in diverse Muslim communities and countries. One of the main objectives of the Dossiers is to provide a forum for the exchange of experience and ideas between women in these communities. The Dossiers explore and synthesize a broad range of analysis, interpretations and strategies of women on issues of feminism, nationalism, internationalism, and religion. Using a wide range of resources (e.g., articles, narratives, press clippings, general information briefs, appeals and information on books and relevant meetings), the Dossiers reveal and share the various ways in which women in Muslim countries and communities are working for greater autonomy.

In order to bring such publications to networkers, as well as to build active linkages with feminists working in other contexts, WLUMML has an active publications programme which produces the following:

- An annual theme based Dossier (English, French and Arabic), an occasional journal which provides information about the lives, struggles and strategies of women in various Muslim communities and countries;
- A quarterly Newsheet on women, laws and society by Shirkat Gah, WLUMML Asia Regional Coordination Office;
- A bi-annual newsletter (English, French and Arabic) to provide networkers with brief, up-to-date information around WLUMML's current areas of concern/work.
- Occasional Papers - specific studies and materials which, for reasons of length or style, cannot be included in the Dossier series; and,
- Other publications on specific issues of concern such as family laws, women's movements, initiatives and strategies, etc.

The WLUMML website is in English, French, and Arabic with selected information in Chinese and Russian, and is updated regularly with news and views, calls for action and publications. The website is used in an interactive way by networkers and is a valuable communication tool. On several occasions networkers have commented on the contents of the website. For example, in January 2002, a group of active networkers reacted within less than 12 hours of our posting information related to a stoning to death case, pointing out a problematic aspect of one of the posted articles. The ICO immediately took their view into account and modified the contents of its website accordingly.

The use of the WLUML website, the Internet and e-mail has not only sped up the process of responding to information requests, but has enabled WLUML to access and circulate more focused information and to build horizontal linkages.

Capacity building is undertaken to strengthen the network's ability to generate, circulate, analyse and use information; to articulate and disseminate alternative points of view through more effective use of communications technology; to facilitate specific training programmes; to develop outreach programmes that can lead to positive social and legal change; and to strengthen international linkages.

This includes collective projects which have included topic-specific initiatives that arise out of the shared needs, interests and analysis of networkers. Collective projects have included training sessions, workshops, research for advocacy, meetings and exchanges around specialised topics. Previous projects include:

- Exchange programme (1988);
- Qur'anic interpretations meetings (1990) and for West African networkers (2002) and Francophone West Africa (2004);
- Women and Law in the Muslim world programme (1991-2001);
- Feminism in the Muslim World Leadership Institutes (1998 and 1999);
- Gender and displacement in Muslim contexts (1999-2002); and,
- Initiative for Strengthening Afghan Family Laws – INSAF (2002 - present).

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