

## Sexuality and Sexual Rights in Muslim Societies

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**ABSTRACT** *In August 2008, the Coalition for Sexual and Bodily Rights in Muslim Societies (CSBR) organized the CSBR Sexuality Institute, the first international Institute on sexuality and sexual rights in Muslim societies in Malaysia. Liz Amado presents how the Institute expanded the discourse, knowledge and thinking around sexuality in Muslim societies, as well as providing a unique space for the much needed exchange of information and experience among sexual rights advocates.*

**KEYWORDS** *Muslim society; militarism; conservatism; advocacy; sexual health and reproductive rights*

### Introduction

In August 2008, the Coalition for Sexual and Bodily Rights in Muslim Societies (CSBR) organized the CSBR Sexuality Institute, the first international Institute on sexuality and sexual rights in Muslim societies in Malaysia. The CSBR Sexuality Institute brought together leading sexual rights activists, researchers and practitioners from 14 countries throughout Asia, Africa and the Middle East. The intensive one-week programme held a holistic curriculum on sexual, bodily and reproductive rights in Muslim societies, combining historical, theoretical and conceptual frameworks of sexuality with emerging issues, contemporary discourses and field experiences. The Institute constituted a significant step in enhancing the discourse, knowledge and thinking around sexuality in Muslim societies. It also provided a unique space for the much needed exchange of information and experience among sexual rights advocates. As one participant observed,

the novelty of this [CSBR's] discourse in our socio-cultural context is certainly one important aspect, but more importantly, the silence that our society harbors around sexuality has become so 'normal' that we often forget how integral it is to our existence and well-being. (Mahrukh Mouhiddin, BRAC University, Bangladesh)

The Institute challenged the silence on sexuality through CSBR's internal, holistic understanding of sexual and bodily rights, while also integrating diverse conceptualizations of gender, sexualities, development and politics. Also, this was the first time in a training of this nature where "unpopular topics" in sexual rights – gay, lesbian transgender etc were brought to the fore and made an important part of the topics at the

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Institute. It sends a very strong message of breaking the long silence on these issues in most societies. From experience I have learnt that most people who claim to work on sexual rights area often limit their area of focus to the so-called "popular areas" – HIV and AIDS, women's rights, adolescents' rights, STIs etc. Rather than adopting this narrow approach to the teaching of sexual rights, the Institute broke new ground by adopting a holistic approach to the teaching of sexual rights' (Ebenezer Drojaye, University of the Free State, South Africa).

### **Creating a holistic, affirmative discourse around sexuality in Muslim societies**

The CSBR was founded seven years ago, following the first meeting on sexuality in the Middle East and North Africa. 'The Women, Sexuality and Social Change in the Middle East and Mediterranean Symposium'. Issues around sexuality were then a taboo in the region. The analysis from that meeting was that sexuality is intricately linked to systems of power politics and domination in society. The means of its control were institutionalized not only in cultural and social norms and customs but also in legal policy and practice.<sup>1</sup> The meeting took place only a few weeks after 9/11. While the impact of 9/11 – in the region and elsewhere – remained yet to be seen, and participants in their press statement remarked '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'.<sup>1</sup> In an already unstable, conflict ridden and tumultuous political climate, participants identified a pressing need for solidarity. Such solidarity was needed to enable their work on numerous aspects of sexuality – from sexual violence to sexuality education, from law reform to honour crimes, from virginity to FGM – as well as a holistic approach to sexuality given how integral it is to equality and social justice.

CSBR has expanded over the years to include 40 organizational members from 15 countries in the Middle East, North Africa, South and South East

Asia. The first decade of the twenty-first century has witnessed unprecedented global wars on sexuality and sexual rights, both in the North and the South. As the only international coalition working to promote sexual, reproductive and bodily health and rights in Muslim societies, the experience of CSBR has been unique. What is emerging is that on the one hand there is increased activism, advocacy and research on sexuality in Muslim societies, opening up progressive spaces and catalysing the advancement of rights. On the other hand, sexuality still remains a taboo, as well as a politically contested domain, in many contexts around the globe with the increasing global militarism, conservatism and nationalism. Human rights violations in the domain of sexuality extend beyond the realm of sexual, reproductive and bodily rights and gender equality. They constitute major impediments to development, social justice and equality as they obstruct access to economic, political, social and educational opportunities of especially women, youth and non-conforming sexualities. The growing Islamophobia in the post-9/11 context is paralleled with the rise of the religious right in many Muslim countries, leading to the control and politicization of sexuality as a major instrument of repression. Despite the increased activism, progressive spaces and legislative changes, the above-mentioned context still lays ground to legitimize such violations and promote the 'rigid notions of masculinity and femininity'.

When CSBR held its General Assembly Meeting in 2007, the major challenges echoed the concerns of 2001 with the added burden of increased conservatism, militarism and Islamophobia. But strength and capacity of the Coalition had taken a major leap over the last six years. Having solidified its affirmative and holistic discourse on sexual rights, enabled alternative spaces on national, regional and international levels, CSBR now possessed the knowledge and strategies to overcome these challenges. One of the key emerging needs identified at the meeting was training and capacity building on sexuality in Muslim societies, both internally for coalition members, and for other advocates, researchers and practitioners in the field. Members also agreed that it was

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important for CSBR to undertake this initiative in order to contextualize sexuality in Muslim societies, and build knowledge from within its own discourse, experience and expertise. The CSBR Sexuality Institute was conceptualized in this framework to advance participants' knowledge, understanding and advocacy skills, while strengthening their theoretical background and analysis of sexuality in Muslim societies.

### **A diverse group, an interdisciplinary curriculum**

The CSBR Sexuality Institute 2008 took place between 16 and 23 August in Cyberjaya Malaysia. The participants included a diverse group of non-governmental organization (NGO) representatives, researchers and practitioners from Bangladesh, Indonesia, Lebanon, Mali, Malaysia, Morocco, Pakistan, Palestine, the Philippines, South Africa, the Sudan, Tunisia, Turkey and Uzbekistan. The group included representatives of CSBR member organizations, as well as other pioneering NGOs and universities. The wide spectrum of the group's areas of work and expertise including sexual health, sexual violence, sexual rights advocacy, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT), youth, and different backgrounds such as human rights, law, medicine, social sciences, art resulted in a unique composition, allowing for extensive knowledge and experience exchange within the group itself.

The Institute was an invigorating and inspiring experience in a number of ways: From the outset of the Institute, the pressing need for information, insight and exchange on the issue was evident. Most participants worked in isolated and challenging contexts, and the opportunity to have the space to come together with advocates from different Muslim societies and be able to share experiences was empowering within itself. As one participant from Pakistan noted,

in most situations where the state and religion is forming partnerships that creates an environment that is not conducive to free thinking and free speech such forums/institute act as mechanism in reinforcing the conviction in the cause one is battling for and also places of knowledge to say the least. (Tahir Khilji, Vision, Pakistan)

The programme was designed to cover a holistic curriculum on sexual, bodily and reproductive rights in Muslim societies, combining historical, theoretical and conceptual frameworks of sexuality with emerging issues, contemporary discourses and field experiences. Composed of lectures, discussions, group work and exercises, roundtables, panels, site visits and film screenings, the Institute sought to provide a comprehensive overview, while engaging participants' own experiences. The first part was devoted to exploring the concepts of sex, sexuality and gender, and a historical overview of sexualities in Muslim societies. While the former addressed the complexity of these conceptualizations and the interrelations, the latter challenged the idea of a monolithic Islam and construction of sexuality, through a historical lens looking at the historical shifts and their constituents. The emerging themes were the fluidity and evolving nature of definitions of sexuality and gender, and that Islam's approach to sexuality is neither static nor solely oppressive.

The sessions were complemented by a roundtable discussion with inputs from participants from Palestine, Lebanon and the Sudan, on femicide and crimes in the name of honour, lesbians and the women's movements, and FGM respectively. The inputs sparked a discussion on the diverse human rights violations in the domain of sexuality in different countries that cannot be legitimized in the name of religion, and the strategies to overcome such violations. Another roundtable was held with participants' inputs from Pakistan and Indonesia, on diverse sexualities including Zenanas in Pakistan, local transgender cultures in Indonesia and young lesbian organizing in Indonesia, which also served to ground the theoretical background on diverse sexualities in different field experiences.

Topics of human sexuality, with an overview of research and history, and sexual diversities, body mapping were geared towards honing the concepts and themes introduced in the first part, while also allowing for a more in-depth discussion of gender and sexualities through historical and conceptual frameworks. They also explored the relationship between sexuality and power, the evolving definitions of sexuality, the instability of the constructions of gender identity and sexualities.

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Following the conceptual, theoretical and historical background and discussion, the next part of the Institute was devoted to an exploration of wide array of issues on sexuality with thematic sessions. The Shariah and sexuality sessions offered a broader framework of the understanding of Shariah and looking into the essence of religion for more positive interpretations of sexuality. Discussions around more contested issues such as sexual orientation and Islam revealed the need for more extensive and progressive scholarship on Shariah and sexuality. While the sexual health session problematized the definitions of sexual health and provided a critical overview of sexual health research and burden of sexual health, the HIV/AIDS, Gender and Politics addressed the epidemiology and feminization of HIV/AIDS and prevention strategies, as well as a discussion of HIV/AIDS from a feminist and human rights perspective through the case of Thailand.

Non-conforming sexualities and rights in Muslim societies offered a holistic view of sexualities and sexual rights, with an inclusive approach including many different sexualities which do not conform to the heteronormative, patriarchal paradigms (single and divorced women, LGBT, sex workers, women with multiple partners, etc.), as well as examples of the variety of frameworks, gateways and alliances from Muslim societies to promote sexual rights. The youth sexuality and sexuality education session covered the demographics of youth, the reasons why youth and sexuality is a pressing issue, as well as the challenges and sexuality education as an opportunity to address them. The session on sexuality and war was structured around a discussion of war, militarism and globalization and their impact on women and sexuality. Militarism and globalization in the post-9/11 context emerged as an overarching concern across all the countries, with severe impact on sexual rights, among others.

### **Contentious issues around sexuality and sexual rights advocacy**

The final part of the CSBR Sexuality Institute was devoted to analyses of contentious issues around sexuality in national contexts, and national and

international advocacy for sexual health and rights. The mappings revealed both the diversity of contentious issues, as well as common emerging trends. The contentious issues included the construction and re/construction of morality to limit sexual rights (Indonesia, Malaysia, Turkey), moral policing (Malaysia, Pakistan), discriminative laws based on Shariah (Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Bangladesh), homosexuality (Lebanon, Indonesia, Malaysia), sexual harassment (Morocco, Tunisia), FGM (Mali, Sudan), family law and penal codes (Palestine), polygyny (the Philippines), condom legalization (Sudan), trafficking (Uzbekistan), sexuality education (Lebanon, Indonesia), HIV/AIDS (South Africa). While the diversity of contested sexuality issues was evident, there were also a number of emerging common trends. The ambiguity and re/definition of terms such as morality, pornography, sexual harassment and sexual health to restrict sexual rights and legitimize control over sexuality emerged as a common concern through the exercise. The opponents' discourses against sexual rights were mostly structured upon a construction of 'morality' and drawing the parameters of moral vs immoral. Islam was also misused to legitimize violations and discrimination with claims of what is Islamic vs non-Islamic, and also through the dichotomy of the Islamic vs the Western. The juxtaposition and/or conflation of the private and public spaces, in particular with the state's infringement on sexual rights appeared in a number of cases.

While in some cases such as Indonesia and Bangladesh progressive Muslim groups were identified as allies, in almost all the contexts fundamentalist religious groups and political Islamists were overt opponents. The governments' stance on sexuality issues was in most cases ambivalent or unsteady, and the impact of international agencies was perceived to be useful in some cases, while detrimental in others. The media, identified as a significant actor by all, also held an ambiguous role, with some fractions supporting SRHR advocates, and others sustaining the mainstream discourses or attacking sexual rights activists. In countries such as Tunisia, Pakistan and Uzbekistan the lack of online security emerged as an obstacle to advocates' efforts.

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Facilitated by two cases of national advocacy from Lebanon on sexuality education and Turkey on the campaign for the reform of the Turkish penal code from a gender perspective, participants worked to identify windows of opportunity and devise strategies for national advocacy in the current contexts. The need to use a combination of tools and strategies for advocacy such as awareness raising, training, research, the media, as well as being creative, and engaging artists and making use of art were identified as essential. Employing the opponents' tactics and using the opponents' language to reverse and/or undermine their reconstructions was identified as a key strategy. For example redefining and re-contextualizing morality to reclaim that what is moral or immoral cannot be ascertained based on one's sexuality and promoting this discourse emerged as a useful tactic. Building alliances and solidarity, as well as engaging with diverse groups as appropriate (i.e. religious leaders, mainstream women's groups, academia, etc.) were also among common strategies. Keeping a low profile and engaging in background work, capacity building, mobilization and building alliances until a window of opportunity presented itself was also identified as a way to be proactive, even before undertaking advocacy efforts. The Institute also presented an overview of international advocacy on sexual and reproductive health and rights, as well as strategies for effective UN advocacy. The second component of international advocacy included a discussion of the experience of CSBR, its approach to sexuality, principles, history and vision.

### **Steps forward**

As one participant stated, 'In face of the rise of the so called fundamentalism or hard line Islamic revivalism, I think the Institute gave me the basic

paradigm to see and analyze how the women's movement should take position in order to challenge the repression' (Dwi Ayu, Komnas Perempuan, Indonesia). The Institute provided a unique opportunity to further the knowledge and understanding of sexuality and to build skills and capacity to promote sexual health and rights in Muslim societies. The CSBR Sexuality Institute also created the space to build solidarity and alliances between participants, paving the way for future collaboration around the issue. At the conclusion of the training, participants came up with a number of strategies to use this experience in their future work including conducting trainings on sexuality at the national levels, conducting research on issues such as LGBT, sexuality and law, sexuality education and early marriage, using the learnings for national and international advocacy.

In her reflections about the Institute, one of the participants from Bangladesh asked,

To me also we must talk about sexuality because if we are silent then the taboos around sexuality, myth prevails and if we allow them to prevail it will be threaten for the concept – the right to have intimate relationships of our own choosing and to have those choices respected, without being victim to violence, ostracism or discrimination, is fundamental to our lives and livelihoods. If women's, men's and transgender people's bodies can be violated by others, and if our very existence is threatened, how can we ever enjoy any kind of development? (Sanaayya Faheem Ansari, Ain o Salish Kendra, Bangladesh)

In this context the CSBR Sexuality Institute was both an enabling and invigorating experience, another step to challenge taboos and myths around sexuality and contribute to promoting sexual rights through advancing a holistic and affirmative approach of sexuality in Muslim societies.

### **Note**

- 1 The Women, Sexuality and Social Change in the Middle East and Mediterranean Symposium, Press Statement, 2001, [http://www.wwhr.org/files/semp\[1\].%20press%20statement.pdf](http://www.wwhr.org/files/semp[1].%20press%20statement.pdf).