

SIMORGH

Women Resource and Publication Centre, Lahore

Annual Report
2008

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Year in Review

2008 was a lean year for Simorgh, as the impact of global recession combined with policy shifts among donor agencies made access to funding more difficult. The situation was further exacerbated by the falling through of a major project due to at source policy changes based on a shift in priority issues. Simorgh was not alone in having to face sudden cut backs, but this was small comfort. However, in so far as our work was concerned, the year was marked mainly by the finalization of on-going projects drawing to a close, applying for new projects and awaiting news about those already applied for.

The year's focus was on field research, mainly in the area of women's empowerment in relation to new and old spaces with reference to old and new religious practices and the impact of modern information technologies on their lives. Publications included our ongoing human rights school texts series, the socio-legal journal *Bayan* and our desk research folktale project, *The Romance of Raja Rasalu and Other Tales*.

I

Lahore Walled City Community Project: Planting the Seeds of Change III

Planting the Seeds Change III is a community project for women in Lahore's Walled City. Starting initially with students of the Fatima Jinnah College for Women in Chuna Mandi, it slowly gained ground among women living in the environs of Yakki, Delhi and Kashmiri Gates with outreach to women from other areas such as Bhaati and Sheranwala Gates.

The Simorgh Community Centre is housed in two small rooms and a courtyard on the ground floor of the house owned by one of the group members, who lives on the first floor with her daughter.

This report is of activities undertaken from January-May 2008

Nayee Soch Nayae Kadam (New Perceptions New Directions)

January 2008 was spent in intensive work involving writing, translating, designing and editing a book based on the Walled City Project with a special focus on violence and other gender-based issues. In writing, translating, editing, and designing of the book on Printed during the next two months, *Nayee Soch Nayae Kadam* has been distributed to relevant community members including those from government and non-government institutions as well as to interested organizations working in this field so that a sharing of experiences can take place and lessons learned prove useful to others involved in similar work.

February – May 2008

From February to May 2008 15 discussion sessions were held with 825 girls and women on various issues. These included (i) a session on dental health care conducted by two women dentists and a dental assistant. Other than information on dental care, they also held a career counselling session with the participants, (ii) courses in fabric and ceramic painting, photography, career counselling and individual counselling sessions for girls and women. The last two are an ongoing activity.

Spoken English Courses

March-May

This course comprised 15 Sessions on Spoken English including life skills. 17 girls from diverse backgrounds and educational qualifications attended this course.

Simorgh's English Courses are demand and need based. As the acquisition of spoken English skills is linked to the job market, course curriculum includes facilitation in writing job applications, Curriculum Vitae etc.

June – August

English classes for a total of 26 young girls were held twice a week. There were two groups with an advanced class of 10 students from the previous sessions and 16 new ones. These classes are not only language classes but also an opportunity for awareness building and provision of information and guidance on life skills and career guidance.

Classes were temporarily discontinued from mid-August due to the commencement of the new academic year. This led to many of the girls dropping out and it was considered impractical to meet only for a handful of students.

Visits to local institutions and homes

Home visits and networking are an essential part of community work and therefore an ongoing activity. Other than home visits, the team visited local institutions such as the Nawaz Sharif Hospital in Yakki Gate, Madrassa-tul-Binat, Madrassa Anjuman e Khadimuldin, (these are normal private girl's schools) and the Vocational Training Institute also in Yakki Gate. Individual visits included meetings with Imam Mufti Hamidul Rahman, Ms Ishrat Bano(Councillor), Fatima Jinnah College Chuna Mandi and so on.

Career counselling:

The Simorgh staff visited seven (7) institutions (which included schools for special children and training institutes) as well as collected data telephonically and on the net to prepare a data base for job opportunities in various fields. This is being used for the career counselling sessions. Additionally visits to the local schools and VTI (Vocational Training Institutes) were also conducted to keep doors open for activities in the near future.

Career counselling was provided through formal and informal sessions. These also included guidance on preparing CVs, giving an interview, grooming etc. .

Lecture was delivered on request of Fatima Jinnah Chuna Mandi College for Career.

With the starting of the new term in September, the following activities were undertaken:

(i) Lecture was given by our Project Advisor, Ferida Sher for 700 students and 10 teachers. This was followed by a question answer session followed by one on subject choices and career guidance for new students.

Personal counselling:

Personal counselling was provided to young girls and older women throughout the year. This was mainly for family problems. The economic crisis in the country is having a negative impact on families where it appears that tension and violence are increasing.

October

Home School Teacher's Training:

A three-day (21-23, October) teacher's training was organized for the fifteen home school teachers at the Simorgh Centre. A master trainer, facilitated by the Simorgh team, was invited to conduct this workshop.

This was a demand-based workshop from teachers living and running home schools in the walled city and who are active participants in various other activities organized by Simorgh.

Relevant material for home schools viz black boards, mats and writing material etc was given to the participants at the end of the workshop.

Over all participant response was positive and led to two follow-up meetings with 7-9 participants who felt they needed to further develop and strengthen their skills.

A Party for FJ College Students:

A party was organized for 18 students and three staff members of the Fatima Jinnah College, Chuna Mandi. These were Women's Studies Masters students who had achieved excellent results in the final exam.

It is to be noted that since its inception three years ago Simorgh has been supporting this programme by providing professional help not through lectures but also in curriculum development and assistance in staff appointments.

The underlying idea behind this event was also to maintain contact with these young women in order to track their development through career counselling and assistance in getting jobs.

Other Activities

- Limited financial assistance from personal sources was provided to a few families facing extreme financial crisis. For some families in crisis financial assistance (from personal sources) was provided.
- Orientation and guidance sessions were undertaken with three interns from the Chuna Mandi College for two months as course requirement for the Masters Gender Studies.

- Some successful efforts were made to find jobs for a few girls and a private scholarship was arranged for one MBA student.
- Visit by Ms Brigitte Voykowitz, an Austrian Journalist to the Walled City. She interviewed students from Fatima Jinnah Collage and 5 women and girls from the community for her radio program.

II

Changing Narratives of Empowerment: Trajectories of Desire and the Mediation of Socio-Cultural Spaces

A comparative action-research project undertaken jointly with BRAC University Dhaka as part of the 'Pathways of Women's Empowerment Research Consortium'. Simorgh is a member of the South Asia Hub located in Dhaka. Financial support was through BRAC University, Dhaka

Simorgh was invited by BRAC University Dhaka as a South Asia Hub partner of Pathways of Women's Empowerment Research Consortium. The 'Changing Narratives of Empowerment: Trajectories of Desire and the Mediation of Socio-Cultural Spaces' was the Simorgh component of a comparative research project undertaken jointly with the BRAC University group.

This was an 18 month project designed with the aim to examine and analyse discursive changes and their impact on women's lives in two different yet inter-related spheres such as (i) the modern day 'dars' as a 'new practice' associated with the rise of Wahabi Islam in Pakistan and (ii) the media especially satellite television and new information technologies in the wider context of globalisation and the spread of a consumerist ethic. The Simorgh project expanded the ambit of research by including traditional religious practices and rituals in the religious component for a deeper understanding of the process.

The project began in the last quarter of 2007 when the initial preparatory work, such as capacity building, developing research methodology, developing questionnaires; a literary review was also undertaken during this period. The actual research, which began in 2008 was carried out with different groups and undertaken by two teams.

The preparatory phase also included:

- 1 Orientation session on the media and the depiction of women. This was followed up by team discussions on stereotypes, image making and the underlying politics of meaning production.
- Focus group discussions as research tool: A visual package was prepared for FGDs to acquire information through discussion sessions. These were based on clips from different TV programmes. The package comprised ads related to

beauty products, daily soaps/TV plays, programmes, film and various other programmes that are being watched and referred by the interviewees.

Participation by Walled City Project Coordinator in the Ghana Life Histories Workshop December 9-11 December, was included in this phase. On her return, she held an in-house session on life histories, questionnaires and oral narratives the Project Teams.

Research sites selected for data collection, interviews and other activities were also identified. These included but were not limited to:

- Walled City
- Dastak Shelter for Women
- 1 Beauty Parlour (employees)
- Kot Lakhpat
- Punjab University students: Departments of Sociology and Islamic Studies
- Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS)
- Students from Lahore College
- Al Huda and other linked sites
- Shrines: i. Darbar of Data Ganj Baksh ii. Bibian Pak Daman

Activities undertaken during 2008 included:

Interviews
Focus Group Discussions
Life Histories
Tabulation
Analysis

Other activities were:

Media monitoring

Popular soaps were watched intensively by the team members to get a direct sense of prevalent stories which were repeatedly referred by interviewees afterwards.

Participation in public dars and related events

Team members attended Dars sessions at Al Huda and at Al Noor as observers. This was an ongoing process. Permission to attend these sessions had been taken from Ms Abida Gurmani of Al Huda. However, the group paid two visits as observers to Al Noor. As they did not attend any lectures there no permission was taken.

Visits to Shrines and local Pirs

These included major sites like the shrines of Data Ganjbaksh and Bibian Pak Daman as well as small local shrines that proliferate in the Walled City and are associated with their own specific rites and specialisation in wish fulfilment.

The Coordinator Walled City Component and One project Advisor participated in a four-day meeting in Dhaka in August to share research findings. The project was completed in September 2008 with the following months being taken up data tabulation and the end of project report which was finalised in January 2009.

III

Tracking Change – the Impact of the Dars on Women’s Lives

Background

'Tracking Change – the impact of women's religious gatherings on their lives' was a short project to supplement research undertaken as part of the larger Pathways to Women's Empowerment Project. As Simorgh's was a small 18 month component of the project, it allowed for a general sense of the situation but precluded an in-depth understanding of what is a wide-ranging and varied field informed by class, caste, cultural and political factors. Financial support was provided by the Heinrich Boll Foundation Lahore.

A participatory research project based primarily on interviews, life histories and focus group discussions, 'Tracking Change' aimed to examine and understand the processes of change taking place as a result of participation in women's religious gatherings such as 'dars' meetings with the view to understanding the dynamics of such interaction with the view to understanding their appeal and impact on women. To see whether and in what ways the dars, itself a relatively new phenomenon that has its roots in Wahabi Islam and the emergence of religion as a marker of singular identity politics provides spaces for women's empowerment or, at the end of the day, reinforces patriarchal parameters.

This project is described in much greater detail than 'Trajectories of Change' so as to give a sense of the work done. As both projects deal with the same issue – these details may be read as represented of both projects.

Activities

During the four-month project period the following activities were undertaken as continuing activity with groups that had been part of the Pathways Project and new groups/individuals identified specifically for the 'Tracking Change' project:

- Focus Group Discussions
- Interviews
- Life histories

- Participation/observation in different activities
- Collation of material
- Final Project Report

Following research sites were chosen to conduct research and project related activities.

- i. Walled City Lahore
- ii. Lahore College University
- iii. A Huda
- iv. Al Noor International

The walled city was selected as a project site on the basis of Simorgh's ongoing projects in this area: (i) 'Planting the Seeds of Change' which is a community based awareness raising project on GBV and related issues and (ii) the Pathways to Empowerment research project undertaken in partnership with BRAC University Dhaka.

The contacts and the level of trust based on over three years of work had (i) created a conducive environment as project activities had already opened up spaces for discussion (ii) this research was a continuation of the work undertaken for the Pathways project

- **Fatima Jinnah Government College for Women, Chuna Mandi**

The college, caters mainly to an economically under-privileged section of society and provides the only access in this area for women to higher education. As such it is performing an important role in the community.

- **Simorgh Centre, Yakki Gate.**

Simorgh has established its small centre in walled city to maintain a continuous visibility in the community and to develop reliable relationship within the area. It was also aimed to establish such a space in the community to convene small local events within their approach such as workshops, orientation sessions and classes on various issues.

A sample of seven (7) interviewees from youth Group of walled city were selected belonged to 3 Shias 4 Sunnis sects. They were interviewed in depth according to their beliefs and practices.

Al Huda

Contact had been established with Al Huda earlier for the BRAC research project. Maintaining the principle of transparency, an interview had been sought with Abida Gurmani to explain Simorgh's interest in Al Huda and to request permission to sit in on classes, interview students and hold focus group discussions with willing groups. Permission was granted and work started with a 3 hour Life History session with Abida Gurmani.

During this period three members of the Simorgh team sat in on different classes, met with the students and carried out questionnaire based interviews. It was through these contacts that the team discovered the existence of Al Noor and attended two lecture sessions there as observers. These activities provided interesting insights into the philosophy and dynamics of Al Huda and the different ways in which it was impacting on women's lives especially with regard to individual 'empowerment' and sense of self-esteem. The main focus, it was discovered was on ritual observance, dress codes, demeanour which were seen as markers of piety and Muslim identity. However, other than the information elicited in the Life History session with Abida Gurmani, during which the 'moral' and 'spiritual' dimensions of religion were discussed, the emphasis was on literalist and mainstream interpretations of Quranic texts.

The 'Tracking Change' project built on these earlier contacts and knowledge base in an attempt to get a more in-depth picture of Al Huda activities and their impact on women. The following activities were undertaken in this regard:

- i. Interviews: 4
- ii. The Ramzan Lectures – 'Daura-e-Quran' (literally 'Quran Tour') by Abida Gurmani
- iii. Participation in the Laila-tul-Qadar Night Prayer/Dars

Sampling of Interviews

Interviews were carried out with individuals at different sites. The different contexts played a significant role in terms of access, the degree of detail, openness of interviewees etc. For instance each Al Huda interviews are presented separately and tend to be brief as they were given reluctantly, on the other hand, the extent of information based on interviews undertaken in the Walled City is presented collectively as the interviewees were more open due to the trust between them and the Simorgh team that had been developed slowly over the past three or four years through other projects.

This is reflected not only in the content and thrust of the interviews but also in the way information is presented.

Interviews and Focus Group Discussion with students of Lahore College University

Five students reading for the BA Hons. degree in Gender and Development were interviewed over a period of two days. They belonged to middle and upper middle class section of the society. They represented Sunni, Wahabi and Shia sects.

Focus Group Discussion: A focus Group discussion was also held with the students of Gender studies department of Lahore College University. The discussion was outlined the religious practices they do in personal lives and how these new Dars gatherings are impacting their lives. One of the students was very particular about the issue of Dars since she belonged to Wahabi sect and basic influence came from her aunt who had

completed a two years course from A Huda. She emphasized that we do not believe in rituals and customary Islam but believe in teachings of Quran and Hadith. Other participants also referred to Dars mehfiles but they were practicing Sunni teachings of Islam. They had some reservations about Shia Muslims.

Laila-tul-Qadar – the Night of Forgiveness

Laila-tul-Qadar or the Night of Forgiveness occurs on the 26th night of Ramzan. It is considered a night of fortune and forgiveness. It is called a night of blessings when angels come to the earth and blessed people who pray for whole night. The time of prayer is usually from around 8 or 9pm and ends with the dawn prayers on the next day. It is believed that there is one moment when for a flash of a second trees bow down in obeisance and water turns to milk. It is this moment that the supplicant must catch. It is also said that it is also the one moment when supplicants nod off – even if it for a flash of a second.

On 27th November 2008 a Laila-tul-Qadar 'event', organised by Al-Noor, was held at the open air theatre at Gadafi Stadium Lahore. It was scheduled from 9pm-2am. Two members of the Simorgh team attended this event. They arrived separately around 9.30.

It was very well organized event kind of women festival where majority of the women were present in festive mood. There were very organized stalls for registrations and supposedly Al Noor trained cadre was doing registration city and district wise which mean women were not only coming from Lahore but from other districts as well. It showed their outreach and access since they were expecting women from Multan, Vehari, and Jhang etc. It was quite evident that women came from Faisalabad, Gujranwala, and Multan and having dinner arranged for them at the top one sine side corner of open air hall.

Women were chatting, having tea, coffee, cold drinks and in the hall most of the women had carried refreshment boxes along.

It was very emancipating for women that they were allowed to stay late night outside home for a religious activity. Contrary to the fact that majority of our women are prohibited to go out late nights. The crowd was representing lower to upper middle class. I t was hard to see women from moneyed elite. Women representing Al Noor were wearing white head scarves and black Abayas. However, the crowd was representing a ritual mood of dress code such as wearing shalwar Kameez and chadar or wearing dupatta covering head and around the body.

Publications and Audio Visual Material

Al Noor publications such as pamphlets and booklets on various topics and audio visual materials were for sale at another table. Two organisers were handling sales. However, there did not seem to be too many buyers despite the low cost of booklets etc.

Participant Profile

Age: participants represented all ages from the elderly to the very young viz infants accompanying mothers. Predominantly young adolescents to middle aged groups with a fair sprinkling of children both boys and girls from infants to about 10-11 year olds.

The Event in Process

The taped recitation was replaced by na'ats by male and female singers respectively and a power point presentation of the ninety nine names of God interspersed with announcements about new Al Noor courses and enrolment procedures and scenic images. A narration of the Prophet's hijrat to Medina from Makkah followed by reference to the Danish Cartoons historically linked the past to the present and made a strong political statement.

Ample evidence of the fact that the organisers were aware of (i) the need to keep the 'audience' engaged and (ii) of the fact that recitation of na'ats unaccompanied by visual images would be ineffective.

Focus Group Discussion with a group from Taangh Waseb Organization Sargodha

A focus group discussion on Dars and other religious practices was arranged with a visiting group of Sargodha. 'TanghWaseb' which is a minority and women rights organization with a focus on religious tolerance and peace. The group came to visit Simorgh to have orientation on Women's movement in Pakistan with particular reference to Women Action Forum. The group comprised on 25 participants including male female both. They were given presentation on Women's movement and then a discussion took place on religious practices they observe in Sargodha. They talked about the various Madrassa that are led by either very extremist organizations such as Lashkar-e-Tayyaba and Lashkar-e- Jhangvi etc. who run these create a cadre of their school of thought so that they could use them as and when required. However, Sargodha is also a hub of many other religious Madrassas that are managed by local religious 'influentials' or traditional Pirs.

According to them most of the students got registration in these Madrassas due to free provision of education, food and other basic necessities. The poor, who are not able to meet the expenses of formal education, they send their children to these Madrassas. There were also a debate on Women rights and Islam. Since the group was a representation of Sunni, Shia, Ahle-e- Hadith and Christians. They discussed this issue according to their perspective.

Conclusion

Research findings of both projects indicate that these issues merit further in-depth research. They deal with significant changes that are bringing about disturbing changes in the mainstream. They highlight issues that need to be addressed, not through coercion but

by drawing upon and highlighting alternative streams of thought and ideas that are also part of South Asian culture. They also point to the more urgent need to address issues of poverty, joblessness and inequality that provide fertile soil for extremist philosophies.

IV

Bayan-a socio-legal journal:

Work was completed on the 6th volume of Simorgh's biannual socio-legal journal *Bayan*. Right to Freedom of Speech is a title of forthcoming journal *Bayan*. The papers of various distinguished writers are included in this journal i.e. I. A Rahman, Ahmed Saleem, Ishtiaq Ahmed, Javed Jabbar, Kamla Hayat, Justice Prabha, Rubina Saigol, and Zaib Un Nisa Burki.

In the market since 2002, *Bayan* received funding initially from UNIFEM for the first volume; subsequently the project was accepted by DFID under GEP and funds were received for a further 4 volumes. This project was completed according to schedule; however, a small donation from English Biscuits, Karachi ensured the publication of volume six. Unfortunately, funding cutbacks depleted our reserves, and though Volume 6 has been print ready for almost a year, printing has been withheld.

Conceived as an advocacy tool with the view to creating a space where judicial decisions and socio-legal issues could be debated from both legal and civil society perspectives, *Bayan* is an important venture that is gaining a slow but sure readership. We have integrated *Bayan* as a component in our Judicial Education on Equality Issues project for which funding possibilities are being explored anew.

V

Human Rights School Texts: *Kaleidoscope* and *Phuljhari*:

Simorgh first long-term partly self sustaining project, the human rights school texts, the *Kaleidoscope* Primers are in use in twenty four schools in the major cities of Pakistan. Texts are supplied directly to schools, thus saving on the book seller's commission, enabling us to keep prices down. Income from sales enables Simorgh to maintain project continuity through regular reprints. However, as the earnings do not cover salary costs of project staff, further publication have been put on hold until further funding. However on the regular demands from the schools reprinting of the primers is continuous procedure. The editing team edit the scripts or illustrations if necessary while proceeding to reprint of required ones.

VI

Nayee Soch Nayae Kadam:

The book *Nayee Soch Nayae Kadam* by Ferida Sher, Firdous Arshad and Shazia Shaheen, is a narrative of the process of the Lahore Walled City Community project . It has been distributed among relevant community members including those from government and non-government institutions as well as to interested organizations working in this field so that a sharing of experiences can take place and lessons learned prove useful to others involved in similar work.

VII

Printing and Launching of Raja Rasalu:

The Romance of Raja Rasalu and Other Tales: illustrated by Laila Rahman, compiled and annotated by Neelam Hussain, with introductions to illustrations and text by Krishen Khanna, Samina Choonara and Neelam Hussain and edited by Sarah Humayun, Shahina Hanif and Samina Choonara, this book is an affirmation of the syncretic tradition of South Asia. The book was launched on 19 December 2008 at National College of Arts. The illustrations were displayed at the exhibition hall and an introductory session to the book was held at Bukhari Auditorium of NCA. The book launch received a good response as evidenced by participant numbers and response came to attend the ceremony. The gathering was representing faculty of NCA, activists, scholars, writers, representatives of civil society organization, and academicians.

Shaista Sonnu, who heads the Department of English Literature at the Punjab University and Huma Safdar, teacher, theatre person and poet in her own right read excerpt from the book in English and Punjabi. However, the highlight of the evening was provided by Baba Mhida, folksinger and traditional storyteller who narrated and sang the story of Sohni and Mahinwal to the accompaniment of the iktara and dholki.

VIII

Green Economics and Globalization in Pakistan: A Public Lecture by Najma Sadeque:

A Public Lecture by Najma Sadeque, an recognised name on environmental issues, was organized by Simorgh in collaboration with ShirkatGah Karachi at the Dorab Patel Hall in the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan building.

Najma Sadeque spoke passionately on issues of food security, poverty and development politics with detailed reference to the fisher folk communities of the coastal regions of Pakistan.