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Charlotte Bunch on UN and VAW

by Nina Somera

As the term of Yakin Erturk as Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women comes to an end in June 2009, various feminists and women’s groups are campaigning for Charlotte Bunch for the post, which women lobbied for during the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights. Bunch is the founder and long-time executive director of the Rutgers University-based Centre for Women’s Global Leadership (CWGL) which has been critical in the formation of the International Coalition of Women Human Rights Defenders and the development of the now global campaign, 16 Days of Activism Against Violence Against Women.

Although many feminists have become quite modest in their expectations from the United Nations (UN), Bunch remains hopeful on the otherwise contested public space in raising awareness on gender issues and holding governments account-

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Fijian Media: Groping in the Dark

by Nina Somera

Two weeks since the proclamation of the 30-day state of emergency, scores of Fijian media and social movements continue to grope in the dark, performing their duties albeit with extreme caution.

A few weeks ago, the country’s Supreme Court deemed the current administration illegal, prompting Fiji’s President Ratu Josefa Iloilo to dismiss the 1997 Constitution and members of the judiciary and reinstate the 2006 coup instigator and military chief Frank Bainimarama as the Prime Minister. Declared last 10 April 2009, the state of emergency prohibits both local and foreign media from reporting news that put the military and the police in a bad light. Some editors and journalists have already felt the whip of censorship through suspension and deportation.

Amnesty International’s researcher Apolosi Bose claimed a palpable climate of fear throughout the islands these days. “There is a very strong military and police presence on the streets, particularly around strategic locations such as government offices and in the nation’s newsrooms. That is a constant and intimidating reminder that the new military regime will not tolerate dissent and will follow through on the warnings it has issued to critics.”

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Timor-Leste: Gently combating Harmful Childbirth Traditions

by IRIN

(Editor’s note: The article was originally published by IRIN on 15 April 2009, with the following URL: <http://www.irinnews.org/report.aspx?ReportID=83929>)

Infant and maternal mortality rates in Timor-Leste are being adversely affected by harmful traditions and practices, according

to experts. But fighting them is a sensitive issue. Nadine Hoekman, country director and programme manager for Health Alliance International (HAI), a Washington-based NGO working with the Health Ministry, told IRIN it was difficult to quantify the problem.

“There are no stats available regarding mortality or morbidity specifically related

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We wanted to have collective DECISION MAKING...
All we achieved was collective PARALYSIS !!

Illustration by Bindia Thapar. From Laughing Matters by Kamla Bhasin and Biandia Thapar. New Delhi: Jagori, 2007

able. Recalling the controversy implicating UN peacekeeping forces, she pointed out, "Some parts of the [UN's] campaign should look inward at the UN system and the UN's own policies and practices...There is more that the UN should do to reduce sexual assault and harassment by its civilian personnel, and to improve its policies with regard to the treatment of spouses of UN employees and of diplomats, who are often left vulnerable to VAW."

CWGL is among the nearly 300 organisations which comprise the Gender Equality Architecture Reform (GEAR) Campaign directed at the UN. In a statement during the 53rd session of the Commission on Status of Women last March 2009 in New York, United States, the Campaign asserted, "The UN still lacks a strong driver at the leadership level, both at Headquarters and at the country level...The UN has several small under-resourced agencies focused exclusively on women's issues. Other larger agencies make critical contributions to women's human rights and gender equality, but this is usually a small part of their mandate."

Aside from advocating changes within the UN, Bunch cited five other factors to make the current UN campaign on VAW effective: emphasis and not exemption of VAW in the creation and enforcement of national laws; prevention of VAW by encouraging the deeper involvement of men and boys; changing community attitudes which foster cultures of violence; accurate data gathering on VAW; and allotment of adequate resources.

Bunch lauded the multi-media "Bell Badjao" campaign of the international organisation Breakthrough, with the attempt to curb incidents of VAW in India. "Bell Badjao" encourages people to buzz their neighbours and the police as soon as they hear screams from women who are being beaten by their husbands. According to India's National Family Survey III, 51 per cent of 75,000 men believe that hitting their wives is acceptable while 55 per cent of women think that spousal abuse is warranted.

However, Bunch clarified that while it is important to have men and boys contribute to the solution, women must still take the leadership in dealing with VAW. "The goal is figuring out everyone's role in ending VAW, including that of men and boys, but it is critical that men respect women's leadership and voices in defining this issue," she said.

Bunch also emphasised that VAW is every country's concern, that its more grotesque forms must not be attributed to the South. She explained: It is important that we re-examine the ways in which culture often gets discussed in relation to gender-based violence, and stop singling out and separating so-called 'traditional cultural practices' from other forms of violence, which are supported by contemporary cultural attitudes. This distinction often reinforces North/South divides and feeds divisive and patronising attitudes about 'the other' as more violent toward women."

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In Gaza, Policewomen Get Back to Starting Out

by Eman Mohammed, Women's e-News

(Editor's Note: This story was originally published by Women's e-News on 19 April 2009 and can be found on this URL: <http://www.womensenews.org/article.cfm?aid=3984>)

Every morning Mariam Al-Bursh prepares a bottle of milk for her 1-year-old baby. Then she gets her badge and gun.

In the Gaza strip, which is controlled by the Islamic resistance movement Hamas, a female police officer's day begins, in several ways, like that of many of her counterparts around the world.

But there are key differences.

There's the uniform, for instance, in a society where ultra-modest dress codes mean the typical female apparel is a long wide gown, or Jilbab, and head scarf. Sometimes it's even a face-covering veil with only a slit for the eyes.

The new female police force in Gaza--formed a year and a half ago, with about 1,000 police officers and growing--adapts by wearing a long, dark blue skirt, a blue tunic and a head scarf.

They also have their own special routine.

In addition to processing office paperwork, they undergo physical training to help police handle girls and women during raids and to break up altercations between women and female teens.

Thrust Into New Roles

But the new female forces in Gaza only had a year on the job before catastrophe struck. On December 27, 2008, more than 60 police stations and compounds were hit by Israeli missiles as part of the 23-day-long war. Many policewomen were thrust into the role of evacuating civilians from dangerous buildings.

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Fijian...

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FemlinkPACIFIC, a feminist communications organisation that runs a community radio is among those subjected to censorship by the military. As coordinator Sharon Bhagwan Rolls shared, “[We send] our broadcast log and community news collation to the Ministry of Information prior to each broadcast. We are also being intently monitored when we are on air (a community radio volunteer received a phone call when she was on air and was told we were being monitored). I have subsequently had to clarify with the Ministry that they channel all communication to me rather than cause extra anxiety to our young women volunteers who, I have to say, are coping marvelously.”

She added, “Even if we are communicating within an eight - 10 kilometre radius, it is an important space that we will work hard to retain. We just hope the rural broadcasts can continue too...Ultimately though, with information and communication channels being tightly controlled rural women will be (are being) further marginalised and isolated.”

FemlinkPACIFIC has also been advocating the implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UN SCR) 1325 which mandates the meaningful participation of women in peace-building processes.

Various national governments and international organisations have criticised Iloilo’s latest move in an apparent series of media repression in Fiji. The World Association for Christian Communication (WACC) has urged churches and leaders to articulate their concerns on Fijian’s struggle to “regain their right to communicate.” The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) also asserted, “The introduction of blanket censorship during the emergency calls the government’s commitment to restoring democracy into serious doubt.” Meanwhile, Reporters without Borders observed, “The military government is heading dangerously towards a Burmese-style system in which the media are permanently subject to prior censorship.”

Iloilo has remained the Head of State since the December 2006 military coup led by Bainimarama. The “new” administration which now continues to govern through Presidential Decree has stated that they plan to remain in power until 2012.

With these latest political developments and pronouncements, the Fiji dollar has plummeted by 20 per cent, most likely to cause grave impact on women who are already struggling to cope with a very depressed economy. Bhagwan Rolls reiterates that what is needed now is critical mediation and dialogue in the true “pacific way” by the Pacific Forum Leaders and the UN and Commonwealth Secretariat.

“There really is no self-correction mechanism. What is needed is not just platitudes but real action to support civil society and women to engage in providing alternatives to what has been decreed towards a return to parliamentary democracy,” she said.

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Timor-Leste...

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to these practices,” she said, adding that even accurate information on exactly how many mothers and newborns are dying is difficult to ascertain since the deaths often go unreported.

“It happens quite a lot that when a mother gives birth, they stay by a fire for three months,” said Macu Guterres, the coordinator of the National Breastfeeding Association for the Alola Foundation, an NGO that supports women and children in Timor-Leste.

“They make a small bed beside the fire and sleep there while the fire burns 24 hours a day,” she said, explaining that the heat from the fire is believed to help dispel “dirty” blood from the body after birth.

“This can affect the baby’s health as well as the mum. The baby can develop asthma or may find it hard to breathe because of the smoke. It happens a lot in Oecussi,” she said, referring to the Timorese enclave deep inside Indonesian territory.

According to figures published by the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF), the infant mortality rate in Timor-Leste in 2007 was 77 per 1,000 live births, which is “relatively high” for the region.

Timor-Leste has one of the fastest-growing populations in the world, with women having an average of 6.5 children each, according to the UN World Population Prospects.

Several NGOs are working to raise awareness of the potential
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Thai engineer gets 10 year-jail term under lese majeste laws

by Nina Somera

After more than three months in detention, Suwicha Thakor was sentenced to 10 years imprisonment under Thailand's Computer Crime Act of 2007 and lese majeste laws. Thakor, 34, was earlier accused of posting the digitally altered images of King Bhumibol Adulyadej on the internet.

Section 14 of the Computer Crime Act of 2007 penalises those who post illegal content on the internet. However, the law is vague in defining what constitutes illegal content. Meanwhile the lese majeste laws prohibit the expression and publication of views which are otherwise critical of the monarchy.

Thakho was convicted of one count of violation of the Computer Crime Act of 2007 and two counts for lese majeste. He would have received a 20 year sentence had he not pleaded guilty of these violations. By admitting to these violations, Thakor did not undergo trial but merely waited for the verdict.

According to Reporters Without Borders, after hearing the verdict, Thakor remarked, "I need help. I must remain in prison for 10 years, but there are five people who are dying," referring to his father, wife and three children.

Free media activists are rallying behind him especially as the move was also read as politically motivated. Given the blessings of the royalty to the newly installed administration of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva, the strong implementation of lese majeste appear to harness the administration's legitimacy.

Today, around 5,000 websites have been banned by the government while some individuals such as prominent academician and activist Ji Ungpakorn have been charged with violations of lese majeste laws. Just last month, Thai authorities arrested the webmaster of Pratchatai, an independent online media for allowing web visitors to post comments which are said to be prohibited by the country's Computer Crime Act of 2007 and lese majeste laws. Although Chiranuch Premchaiporn was later released, nine new charges were filed against her in April 2009.

Thai Netizens Network and other groups continue to lobby for Thakor's release and assist his family, displaying on their website the bank accounts where donations can be made.

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danger of such customs for mothers and babies, but this is not easy given that the adult literacy rate is just over 50 percent (UN Human Development Index).

Traditional birth attendants

Traditional birth attendants ('dukuns'), using traditional medicines and sometimes harmful practices, are common, especially in rural areas. The Alola Foundation estimates that only 10 percent of women in Timor-Leste give birth with the assistance of a skilled birth attendant.

According to HAI, harmful practices by 'dukuns' include encouraging the mother to push before she is ready, and placing rice or other substances in the birth canal to "lure the baby out".

"Sometimes this choice [of birth attendant] is related to a stronger belief in the skill and practices of a traditional birth attendant in the community as compared to a trained health person," Hoekman said.

Another common belief is that colostrum, the nutrient-rich milk mothers produce in the late stages of pregnancy and immediately after birth, is bad for the baby.

"They believe using water and honey instead of colostrum will wash the baby's stomach and intestines and remove dirty blood," Alola Foundation's Guterres said, adding that the Foundation has 436 volunteers in nine districts working in "mother support groups".

Rogerio Pedro Sam, an obstetrician and gynecologist at the Mother of Perpetual Help Pharmacy and Clinic in Bidau (part of Dili), said another harmful custom was the taking of a really hot bath, and drinking really hot water, after delivery. "Sometimes they burn their skin," he said, explaining that the hot water is believed to flush out "dirty" blood after childbirth.

Sam said harmful practices were most prevalent in rural areas, where 70 percent of the country's one million people live.

"Behaviour change is a long process. We try for a multi-pronged approach in our work - using different strategies to address issues, keeping messages simple and consistent, but delivering them in a variety of ways," HAI's Hoekman said.

"Rather than operating under the assumption that anything traditional is bad, and modern is good, we have chosen to look at how non-harmful traditional practices can be supported."

In Gaza...

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One of them was Mariam Al-Bursh.

At one point during the concerted late-December attacks on the police facilities she was helping lead people from a police compound, Eman Hasan, a colleague of hers, said in a recent phone interview.

Hasan said Al-Bursh had to guide people past the dead body of her own husband, who had been killed in one of the air raids on the building.

“Mariam was the top leader among us,” Hasan told Women’s eNews. “Everything went crazy and hundreds of our policemen colleagues were killed, including her husband, but she held it together and evacuated us all.”

Ghada Hassan, 30, a member of the police’s legal division, helps to prepare cases for court.

“We are well trained on dealing with dangerous situations and defending ourselves and others, especially women,” she said. “It’s this sense of duty that keeps us going. Even when the attacks started we were able to handle it well, although no one had seen it coming since we are policewomen and policemen, not terrorists.”

Little Family Support

Many of the policewomen say they get little encouragement or support for the path-breaking line of work they have chosen.

“My mother and brother didn’t agree with the idea of a girl

working as a police officer, or anything of that kind,” Hanady Karso, 26, a recruit in the investigation division, said.

But she added that her mother and brother will probably understand one day. “I believe that my colleagues and I are doing a big favor for people in Gaza by protecting women and giving them more privacy. We also help our male colleagues when raiding houses of suspected drug dealers or criminals.”

Aisha Abu Nada, 50, is an investigator in the new female division. The mother of seven said that unlike many of her colleagues, her family didn’t offer any opposition.

She attributed that to her background as a practicing lawyer. She said she changed fields because she wanted a new experience and thought that she could help her community by serving in the police force. Nada said two of her daughters have joined the force, with her encouragement.

Nada, however, has had to give up her new line of work. Her house was badly damaged when an Israeli warplane shelled a neighbor’s house. After that she decided to stay home to take care of her younger children, who were badly upset by the attack, and to help rebuild their home.

In an interview before he was killed in the police compound attack in late December, Tawfiq Jaber, director of police in Gaza, spoke highly of the progress the force had made in establishing its female forces and gaining surprisingly widespread social support. “In a very short time we have gone very far with the female division, which means we are on the right track.”

Jaber was killed by an air raid during a graduation party held for police students about to become members of his police unit.



We! is the newsletter of Isis International, an international NGO servicing women’s information and communication needs within and beyond Asia and the Pacific region. We! provides the latest information on the issues, campaigns, conferences, training opportunities, funding possibilities and other goings-on in the women’s movement. It also provides updates on national, regional and international events organised by NGOs, government bodies and multilateral agencies that impact women.

We! comes out in both electronic and print editions. The electronic edition is circulated every two weeks, and the print version as special editions. In consideration of the limitations of print space and time-bound nature of some of the materials, not all articles and postings in the electronic version will be included in the monthly version. Isis International encourages feedback and looks forward to receiving information about your activities, issues and campaigns. Archives of we! may be viewed at <http://www.isisinternational.org>

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