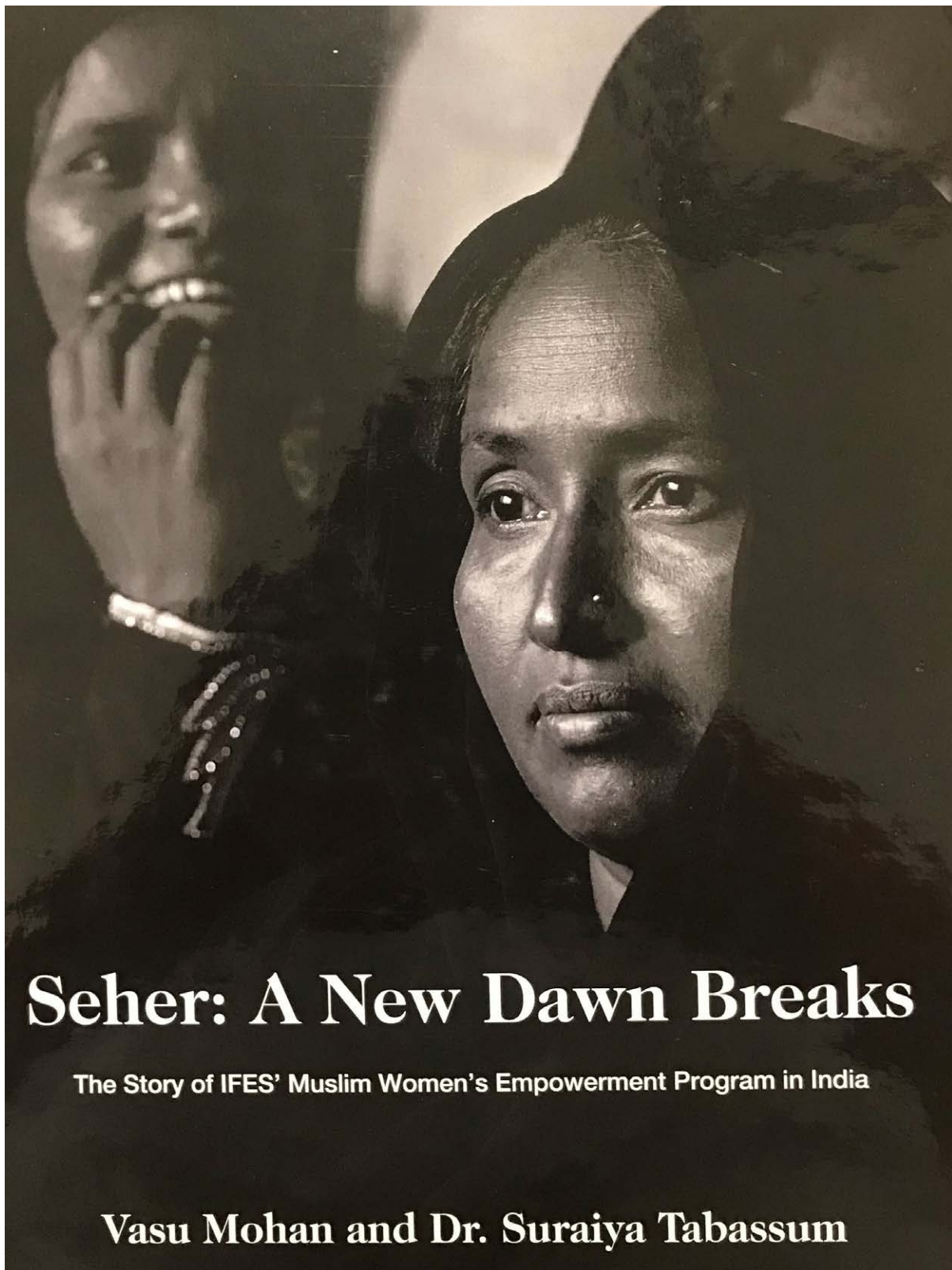




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Seher: A New Dawn Breaks

The Story of IFES' Muslim Women's Empowerment Program in India

Vasu Mohan and Dr. Suraiya Tabassum

"Seher: A New Dawn Breaks" (Valuable Inclusion Lessons from the Muslim Women's Initiative)

(Contributed by Vasu Mohan and Sarah Bibler, IFES)

The story of a path-breaking women's empowerment program, *Seher: A New Dawn Breaks*

highlights the inclusive and transformative approach of the Muslim Women's Initiative (MWI) in India. Launched in the Indian state of Karnataka and Rajasthan in 2004, the program was implemented by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) and its local civil society partners to arrest the negative cycle of Muslim women's marginalization and promote their social, economic and political participation. MWI was supported by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and other funding sources and implemented as a key component of IFES' Women's Legal Rights Initiative (WLRI).

Working with local partners in India, IFES' MWI program utilized a multi-pronged approach that engaged an array of community, religious and civil society leaders to enhance Muslim women's active participation in the democratic process. The cornerstone of the MWI program was information dissemination workshops for women and men on the rights of women as described, in both the Qur'an and in Indian law. MWI also focused on establishing community-based groups that would safeguard Muslim women's rights within and outside of the community. Through these community-based groups, IFES trained group members to provide counseling services; increased women's awareness about how to access free legal aid desks, courts, hospitals and police stations; conducted outreach to youth through classes on women's rights in secondary schools and madrasas; and launched credit initiatives. MWI also included women's leadership learning programs that focused on building service-oriented and ethics-based leadership.

Over seven years (2004-2011), MWI directly reached over 30,000 women and men. MWI's community-based approach resulted in a transformational shift for Muslim women's rights. More than five years after funding ended for MWI, partners are still actively engaged in program initiatives that continue to inspire action at the community and state level. One example is the continued effort to engage community members and government administrators in celebrating newborn girls. Beginning in 2007, MWI encouraged community-based groups to hold celebrations that brought together community leaders and members to honor the birth of a new girl child and reverse negative perceptions about girl children. Today, as a result of this initiative, such community celebrations continue and every mother who delivers a girl baby now receives a congratulatory message signed by the Chief Minister. This powerful video shows other ways that MWI helped changed attitudes towards female children and saved many girls from infanticide and feticide.

Another example arose from MWI's series of advocacy trainings that empowered women with the skills needed to advocate to policymakers on issues of gender equality. MWI partners engaged in these trainings went on to conduct advocacy and create public demand for Muslim women's marriage rights. Their efforts influenced the Indian Supreme Court's landmark decision in 2017 to [outlaw the practice of 'triple talaq' divorce](#).

Another significant outcome was the emergence of Muslim women and youth as leaders in their communities. Women who previously never left their homes ran for office and were successful in doing so. Once elected, they became leaders and advocates for the basic rights of women.

The experience of the MWI program provides valuable insights for other programs that seek to expand inclusion of women and minorities in mainstream democratic structures specifically, as well as broader democracy development programs in general. **Key lessons learned** include:

1. **Existing knowledge, beliefs and strengths of marginalized groups should be taken into consideration in developing and implementing programs for democratic inclusion:** Each community is unique and should be engaged from the outset in any program affecting its own future. This allows for endorsement and ownership of the program and provides insights into the community that can ensure a program is carefully targeted, while drawing on existing community knowledge, strengths, and resources to ensure sustainability of the intervention.

2. **Individuals should not be seen as victims or passive recipients of support, but rather as active protagonists and partners in the development of themselves and their communities:** Marginalized individuals are often already negotiating challenges with resourcefulness and creativity, and are capable of being active and inspiring agents of change. It is important to recognize this agency and provide individuals with the knowledge, resources and support to take a lead role in generating sustainable change.

3. **Rights education and support to access those rights builds confidence in marginalized groups needed for greater social and political participation:** MWI demonstrated that through continued education and awareness-raising activities, along with capacity-building and support, Muslim women in India could develop the confidence required to become change-agents in their communities. Without continued rights awareness training, women's groups risk becoming only microcredit or other narrowly-focused groups, and the wider benefits of the group's existence such as support to access to justice and combating gender-based violence are lost.

4. **In any project whose goal is to improve the lives of women, it is essential not to ignore the other half of the community:** The involvement of men in women's empowerment programs is critical. MWI demonstrated that when men in the community were included in the program as partners they supported the empowerment of women, became active advocates for women's rights, and helped to create equality-conscious environments with lasting impacts.

5. **Empowerment of marginalized groups requires the involvement of existing leaders and trusted intermediaries from the marginalized community:** Mainstreaming is more likely to be successful when it is seeded within a community, not imposed from without. In many cases, marginalization has occurred through or with the support of powerful social or religious drivers, and there must be a willingness of both leaders and community members to address those forces. Endorsement and ownership of empowerment programs by the marginalized community itself is therefore crucial.

6. **Youth are a major source of idealism, energy and enthusiasm in communities. Harnessing this potential through school-based programs can be highly effective:** In every community, youth have the power to contribute significantly to shaping not only the future but also the present. MWI demonstrated that young people not only take keen interest in issues facing their communities, but are also effective and enthusiastic agents of change. In addition to students, the program also reached teachers, parents and education officials. It was a good

example of using mainstream structures — secondary schools — to carry out empowerment programs for marginalized communities.

7. Emerging leaders should be introduced to the ideas of community leadership and leading with integrity:

A lesson from the MWI leadership trainings is that careful attention must be paid to the selection of a model of leadership that is beneficial to the entire community. Dominant models of leadership based on the notion of exercising power over individuals, as opposed to building capacity in people, is counterproductive to and at odds with overarching inclusion goals. Leadership trainings emphasized that the goal of women's groups was to effect change in their own lives and in the life of their communities, and helped ensure that participants held themselves and their leaders to the standards of accountability, transparency and integrity.

8. Linkages between government and private structures and services, and engagement in mainstream political governance processes are critical:

Empowerment of marginalized communities cannot be successful in isolation or the challenges related to marginalization from the wider community will remain. Effective advocacy in support of a more inclusive identity of the wider community at the local, state and national levels, as well as intentional engagement with state structures is also important.

9. Intersectionality and interconnectedness of various dimensions of marginalization of minority women require multi-dimensional interventions:

More than one condition of marginalization will likely exist within any community. These conditions — including lack of education, poor health, poverty and discrimination — may be interlinked. Program implementers should involve the target community in assessments of all factors that contribute to marginalization at the beginning of the program and seek to address as many of them as possible through a coordinated response.

10. Collective action through community action groups, networking, and building alliances contribute to sustainability of the program:

In MWI, the formation of women's self-help groups improved the socio-economic status of participating Muslim women and ensured that the overall benefits of the MWI program were sustainable. As structures were developed, women enthusiastically used those structures, not only to address the specific issues they faced, but also to resolve wider development issues within their communities.

11. Robust monitoring and evaluation and research should be part of the design of the program to ensure efficacy and inform the wider discourse and practice:

Program evaluation and research efforts must prioritize the marginalized group's own needs, issues, and priorities determined through qualitative discussions with community leaders and people. Triangulating these values where possible from key informant interviews, information reflecting other groups' experiences, and statistics is also recommended. MWI partners were able to contribute valuable data to the government's own research on minority communities and use the findings and analysis of this data aggregated across the nation when the government published and disseminated reports.

12. Programs aimed at mainstreaming marginalized groups and minorities should

be based on principles of equality, transparency, accountability, integrity, and the rule of law, and a firm belief in the power of unity, not only within the marginalized community but also with the wider community: MWI was upfront in defining core values for the program and using both Qur'anic and secular quotes and resources to establish an atmosphere of strict adherence to democratic values and human rights principles. These values were reinforced in the information workshops and other events, and through other means such as monthly newsletters and other communication mechanisms.

13. Programs to advance the equality of women and men cannot be conceived only in terms of bringing women into the various arenas of the current power structures. They must involve women and men striving together to build a new social order: MWI participants worked together to conceptualize fundamentally different concepts of power, work and equality. Power was conceptualized as the capacity to transform, mutualistic and integrative. Work was conceptualized not just as a means to accumulate material wealth that enriches a few but as a means to collective prosperity that promotes individual and community well-being. Equality was explored as not only a recognition of the unremunerated and unacknowledged work of feeding, nurturing and caring that women perform, but also full participation of women in all fields and decision-making. Exploring, developing, and articulating these concepts contributed to the success of MWI.

Readers interested in women's political participation will also appreciate the 10 case studies found in [*Journeys from Exclusion to Inclusion: Marginalized Women's Successes in Overcoming Political Exclusion*](#), publishes by IDEA in 2013, which identifies critical factors preventing marginalized women's inclusion in customary and democratic decision-making structures and describes how women have worked in overcoming barriers to their participation.

Photo: Cover of Saher: A New Dawn Breaks.



LGBTI Inclusion and The Yogyakarta Principles+10

The In November 2017 the [UCLA Law's Williams Institute](#), dedicated to conducting rigorous, independent research on sexual orientation and gender identity law and public policy, released its [Yogyakarta Principles Plus 10 \(YP+10\)](#) that include nine new principles and 112 additional state obligations, all of which directly address developments in international human rights law and changes in society. The Yogyakarta Principles are simply a universal guide to human rights with an affirmation of a binding international legal standards with which all States must comply. They promise a different future where all people born free and equal in dignity and rights can fulfil that precious birthright.

The YP+10 document emerged from converging developments in international human rights law, an emerging understanding of violations suffered by persons of the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity and the recognition of the distinct and intersectional grounds of gender expression and sex characteristics. Each Yogyakarta Principle is accompanied by detailed recommendations and an emphasis on all actors (including States, UN, human rights institutions, media, non-governmental organizations, and funders) to promote and protect human rights.

Key recognitions and obligations in YP+10 include:

1. A broader recognition of characteristics upon which governments may not discriminate. The original Yogyakarta Principles focused on sexual orientation and gender identity, or SOGI. YP+10 provide guidance on human rights based on sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics, or SOGIESC.
2. The rights of intersex people. YP+10 stated that no one should be subjected to invasive or irreversible medical procedures, including those done for sex conditions, without free, prior and informed consent. This includes children, in a manner consistent with their evolving capacity.
3. The rights of refugees. A well-founded fear of persecution based on SOGIESC is acceptable grounds for the recognition of refugee status, and all asylum seekers have the right to protection from violence and discrimination during the determination of their claims.

Despite recent progress on human rights, disturbing facts remain in many corners of the world. These include daily violence, harassment, discrimination, exclusion, stigmatization and prejudice directed toward people based on their sexual orientation, gender identity, race, age, religion, disability, health and economic status. These systematic abuses, marginalization, and exclusions not only undermine the integrity and dignity of these people, but also weaken their sense of self-worth and belonging to our society. As a result, we have seen, among us, marginalized people concealing or suppressing their core identities to live in constant fear and invisibility.

“The Yogyakarta Principles are not about aspiration,” notes **Andrew Park, International Program Director of the Williams Institute**. “They detail exactly what governments should be doing to comply with current international standards under today’s human rights treaties. When countries appear before the U.N. to have their human rights record reviewed, they

are asked if they comply with the Yogyakarta Principles.”

Graphic: Yogyakarta Principles Plus 10 (YP+10), Williams Institute, UCLA Law, November 2017.



D-LAW: An Inclusion-Sensitive Legal Scholarship Program

Innovative inclusive development approaches come in many shapes and sizes. One such initiative, [Deaf Legal Advocacy Worldwide](#), a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, is committed to capacity building in the form of awarding scholarships for deaf leaders to attend law school in their home countries.

The rationale for the scholarship is this. Most countries around the world have ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), a treaty that recognizes the human rights of people with disabilities. After countries ratify the CRPD, they must take steps to implement the treaty through new legislation, regulations, and policies designed to fully include people with disabilities in society. In many countries, government entities are working with cross-disability coalitions in implementing the CRPD. However, deaf people have largely been left out of this effort due to ongoing language and cultural barriers with government officials and advocacy organizations. D-LAW empowers deaf leaders by equipping

them with the legal skills necessary to serve as a bridge between their local deaf communities and the political/legal systems in their countries.

D-LAW is ramping up its scholarship program, with five D-LAW Fellows currently in the program, and plans to award 3-4 fellowships each year. As law school is 3-5 years in most countries, D-LAW anticipates within a few years having approximately 15 fellows receiving scholarships at any given time. The scholarship covers tuition, interpreters/captioning, and living expenses during law school. The scholarship also provides mentoring, pairing deaf lawyers with the Fellows, as the fellows are often the first deaf law students in their countries. The mentoring also provides training for the fellows to secure funding to become disability rights advocates after law school (the scholarship provides funding for law school only).

D-LAW's Executive Director, Michael Stein, does the bulk of the work running the organization on a pro bono basis while practicing disability law full time in the United States. Stein mentors the five D-LAW Fellows, oversees the logistics and funding, secures accommodations for law school, and monitors the Fellow's academic progress. The program is currently recruiting: deaf lawyers who may be interested in serving as mentors, deaf students may be interested in serving as interns, administrative support in overseeing funding and transferring to cover tuition, accommodations; assistance in spreading the word about the scholarship so more people know about it and apply for it; connections with lawyers in the Fellows' countries who can provide local mentoring support for the fellows, help them make connections, and assist them in getting off the ground as disability rights lawyers after law school; assistance with fundraising; and assistance with video production to promote the fellows and the scholarship -- this will increase the number of applicants, help with fundraising, and get media attention.

We applaud this effort to recognize and invest in the agency, access and transformative power of deaf law students who will in turn take a lead role in generating sustainable change in their countries.

Photo: Courtesy of Deaf Legal Advocacy Worldwide, 2017.

This Week's TAAP Staff Pick:



The 100&Change Game Changer: Disability Inclusion in Grant Selection Criteria

In an online article, [Nothing About Us without Us](#), Marca Bristo, President and CEO of Access Living relates how Access Living worked with a major philanthropic actor, the MacArthur Foundation, to integrate inclusion in to the 100&Change Competition. [100&Change is a](#)

[competition](#) for a \$100 million grant that promises “real and measurable progress in solving a critical problem of our time.” Bristo reached out to the Foundation’s President, Julia Stasch, prepared to advocate that disability be integrated in the competition’s evaluation criteria. Fortunately, the Foundation’s leadership was already on board with this strategy and through the partnership that emerged eight semi-finalists were provided guidance and self-assessments, including on the degree to which people with disabilities were involved in the planning, staffing and implementation of their projects. The MacArthur Foundation used Access Living’s [accessibility and inclusion checklist](#) and questions such as ‘As part of long-range and annual planning, do you address accessibility issues with regard to facilities and/or services and include them as a cost of your operations?’ in a process that resulted in proposals that specifically address disability inclusion. For example, one of the finalists, Catholic Relief Services, detailed in their proposal support measures for children who are placed orphanages because of their families’ inability to access specialized assistance for children with disabilities. (Details can be found in this resource: [Changing how society cares for children in orphanages.](#))

The global disability rights movement has made considerable success through the adoption of the American Disabilities Act and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Bristo notes however that, “while some foundations and corporations have taken the initiative to include people with disabilities, many more have excluded us from the very spaces intended to advance inclusion.” Competitions such as 100&Change will showcase the benefits that societies can reap when they integration disability inclusion in interventions that address the world’s most pressing sustainable development challenges.

Graphic: Courtesy of John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, 2017.



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