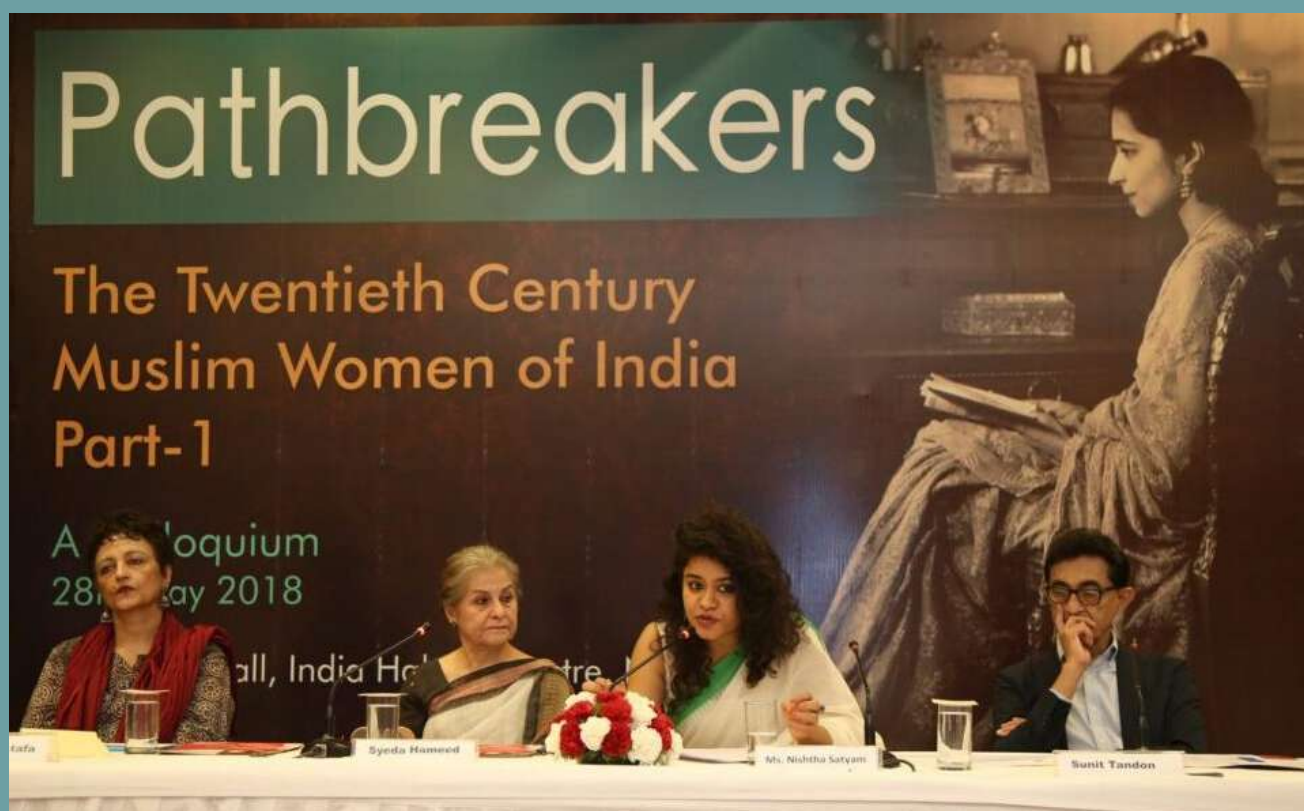


# ANNUAL REPORT 2018-2019

MUSLIM WOMEN'S FORUM



# PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE



Annual Report of Muslim Women's Forum is before you, friend and fellow traveler, as we enter our 20th year.

It all began with two of us Dr. Sughra Mehdi, Professor of Urdu, Jamia Millia Islamia and me, post my term as Member National Commission for Women. I had just completed and released my report, 'Voice of the Voiceless: Status of Muslim Women in India'. I never imagined that this report would become a lifelong commitment. We, Dr. Mehdi and I, requested Begum Saeeda Khurshed who was nurtured with the ideals of her father Dr Zakir Husain, to become the first Chairperson of Muslim Women's Forum. There was no one in this field of human endeavour; we began with a few foot soldiers to bring Muslim Women forward as arbiters of their own destinies. Suddenly we found all doors opening for us. From political to religious leaders, from CSO's to women's groups, we found response from all quarters.

Twenty years later we find ourselves at a crossroads. The world changed beyond recognition since December of 2019. First Muslim women rose up to defend the Constitution and Shaheen Bagh became a symbol of their determined entry into the mainstream. Second came the pandemic which shook the globe with the universal whiplash of nature. India became afflicted along with the entire developed and developing world. Muslim women faced the onslaught with courage and fortitude as did their sisters across religious divides. Now their trauma is doubled on account of the fall out of Tablighi Jama'at incidence.

What will be our road map in this changed world is the question we are grappling with. We have always drawn strength and guidance from our well-wishers across the globe. We are a small entity but have a big footprint because all of you stand by us.

I end with a wish and a prayer in the beautiful words of the poet Akbar Allahabadi:

*Hujoom e bulbul hua chaman mein kiya jo gul ne kamaal paida  
Kami nahi qadrdaan ki Akbar karey to koi kamaal paida*

Nightingales crowded the garden when rose attained sublime beauty  
Never is there lack of admiration Akbar; if only one attains excellence

**SYEDA HAMEED**

**PRESIDENT, MUSLIM WOMEN'S FORUM**



## ORGANISATIONAL PROFILE

Muslim Women's Forum (MWF) is a not-for-profit organisation formed in 2000. The aim of the Forum is to work for the empowerment, inclusion and education of Muslim women. Over the years, MWF has organized public hearings on socio-economic realities and violations, debates on personal laws, lobbied with various Muslim law boards, and conducted seminars on Muslim women's livelihood opportunities, among others. An important aspect of the organization's work includes legal education on the rights of women within Muslim law. The intent has been to inform and empower Muslim women so that they can actively participate in Muslim fora that govern interests and laws of the Muslim community in India and also build capacities of Muslim women to participate in wider civil society discourses and not get hemmed in only with their religious identity so as to pluralize the Indian civil society. MWF has also helped nurture rights, peace and social reconciliation initiatives with different groups across the country and we see our role as a catalyst among a multitude of stakeholders who engage in constructive dialogues towards gender-just and gender-sensitive societies. We hope to gather women leaders to work on largely minority issues. In doing so, we intend to contribute towards building a just and democratic society for communities to live life with dignity.

## OBJECTIVES

- To provide platform to Muslim women to address issues affecting their lives.
- To study and assess conditions prevailing in the Muslim mohallas particularly around Muslim women.
- To collaborate and engage with parents, community members, civil society organizations and government to better understand and advocate the rights of Muslim women.
- To build capacities of women from marginalized communities to respond to growing marginalisation and vulnerability.
- To arrange and enhance skill-building and development of human potential through educational, vocational and technical training courses.
- To empower the poor, marginalised and discriminated sections of Indian society to live a life with dignity.

## ORGANISATION MODEL

MWF is connected to the grassroots through a network of community workers in partnership with other organisations. We organize awareness programs on health, education, women's rights under Islam, legal rights of women and also train women on self-sustenance through computer training and basic life skills. In the last one year we have been able to train 15 individuals as grassroots leaders, who are an extension of our resource pool.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank all the support organisations and individuals who enabled us to engage with various partners and communities. It is this support that has impacted many partners and communities to live life with dignity. We thank in particular, Janvikas, Dalit Foundation, National Foundation for India, HID Forum and Econet for their strong support and strategic partnership with us. We also thank all our associates and resource persons who worked with us and enabled us to achieve our goals and learn. We look forward to continued meaningful collaborations and partnerships with them in the coming years. Our work would not have been possible without the dedicated involvement of extended resource support. We thank Dr. Aziz Qureshi, Mr. Gagan Sethi, Mr. Martin Macwan, Mr. Pradip More, Dr. K.L. Mehra, Dr. Monisha Behal, Dr. Tazeen Mahmood, Ms. Sheba George, Ms. Sarover Zaidi and so many others who are unmentioned here but whom we deeply appreciate and sincerely thank for having invested both in our growth and that of MWF. We also thank our Governing Board members for their active role and contribution in providing strategic direction for MWF.



## OVERVIEW OF THE YEAR

2018-19 was a challenging and exciting year for us at Muslim Women's Forum. We continued on our journey with critical stakeholders and issues that are close to us, made new connections and engaged in diverse collaborations. The year was also marked with new learnings for us as an organisation. For our various activities during 2018-19, we collaborated with a total of 11 organisations including UN Women, Dalit Foundation, HID Forum, North East Network, COVA Hyderabad, Association of Advocacy and Legal Initiatives (AALI), Majlis, Chhatarpur Mahila Jagriti Manch and many more.

For many years, MWF have been saying that Muslim women should join the causes of gender across all religions and communities and get on the mainstream of protests rather than only doing it on triple talaq, polygamy, personal laws. Sadly these are the issues for which Muslim women are 'used' by rigid obscurantists of the community. Muslim women have come out on larger national and global issues. So this is a kind of benchmark. The voices and opinions of women of any community, nationality or region matter. Their understanding of politics and policies, war and peace matters! True empowerment comes from being able to freely discuss, share opinions and have an equal say in all matters. And women's empowerment, be it for Muslim or non-Muslim women, seems to be finally finding the courage to come out of the shadows of the night and seek a new dawn.

*Kuch nahi to kam se kam khwab-e-sehr dekha to hai  
Jis taraf dekha na tha aab tak, udhar dekha to hai*  
Though elusive, yet we dare dream of the dawn,  
We never looked there, now we look for the morn  
- Jan Nisar Akhtar

## DETAILS OF MWF ACTIVITIES:

At MWF, our mission is to inform, inspire and empower. Our endeavour is to reach out to women in increasingly innovative ways. The followings are some of the activities organised by us:

### WORKSHOP ON UNDERSTANDING ISLAM:

Muslim women in India not only share the general backwardness of the women but also suffer because of the misinterpretation of personal laws, which gives unbridled power to males. Islam has given women rights, however, there are many Muslim women who are victims of outmoded and pernicious practices, which are the distortions of the Shariah. These practices are often antithetical to the spirit and injunctions of the Quran. They are the consequences of hegemony of males who wish to dominate and of the women's ignorance of their rights under their own religion. Consequently, many of them are unable to make their full contribution to the social, political and economic life of the community. There has been a constant struggle within the community to address this grievous injustice. In 2018, MWF started the workshop on 'Understanding Islam: Theology, Sociology, and Legality'. It aims to explore the various myths and notions about Islam, so that it could eventually lead to peace building measures. The objective is to provide the participants with an opportunity to increase their understanding, awareness, and sensitivity of a range of issues related to Islam.



The workshop drew from history, theology, anthropology, sociology, and the fine arts (music, poetry, literature and art) to provide a multidimensional perspective. Surahs of the Quran, Life of the Prophet (PBUH), Sunnah, Hadith formed the core of the study interspersed and interlaced with poetry, and literature as its cultural expression.

Between 2018 to 2019, MWF organized Understanding Islam workshops at five different locations:

Sl. No.	Date	Place	Partners
1.	3 - 6 January 2018	Ahmedabad, Gujarat: Neembadi, Sanand, Bavla Road, Nani Devati, Sanand	Sangram Sanstha
2.	9 - 11 July 2018	Lucknow, UP: Hotel Leanage, Gomti Nagar	AALI
3.	3 - 7 December 2018	Bangalore, Karnataka: Visthar Campus, Bangalore	HID Forum, Dr. Majeed Foundation, and Visthar
4.	27 - 28 July 2019	Delhi	Econet
5.	17-18 December 2019	Patna, Bihar	OXFAM, India

MWF is committed to take the workshops to other districts that are communally sensitive, where awareness levels among the population are low and the socio-economic condition of Muslim community is poor. The programme would involve local grassroots organisations and resource persons who would give inputs for intervention and assist in selecting participants for the workshop. At each workshop conducted we have a total of 25 - 29 participants from across religions, from different districts, representing over 15 civil society organisations. Full report is available upon request:

### *The Road to Understanding...*

In Bangalore, the following comments emerged from participants:

*"I knew 1% about Islam, now I know 10%. I still need to learn 90% about it. My work in the field involves working with issue of violence against Muslim women. Some of the women are organized and they work against violence. They support me. I use to wonder how to make people understand, and spread awareness. I didn't have any literature with me then. What I have learnt from this workshop....the knowledge that I have gained has become a pillar for me."*

*"After this workshop I now know about mehr, that a girl can decide what her mehr should be. We need to educate our girls so that they are empowered and stand on their own feet. They should be able to do and become whatever they want to in life and live it as they want to and not be forced into doing what we parents want. In our slum, after the riots, the divide between Hindus and Muslims became very big. There is a need to become one - a need to respect all religions".*

*"I wish that these workshops are offered as a series."*





## Photos from Understanding Islam workshops:



*Lucknow workshop was attended by 26 participants both men and women, representing 18 civil society organisations.*



*Patna workshop was attended by 44 participants*



*The first Understanding Islam workshop was held in Sanand, attended by 25 participants.*



*Workshop held in Bengaluru was attended by a total of 29 participants from 8 districts of Karnataka and 1 participant from Mumbai, representing 15 civil society organizations.*

## PATHBREAKERS: THE TWENTIETH CENTURY MUSLIM WOMEN OF INDIA EXHIBITION AND COLLOQUIUM

Early 2018, MWF curated an exhibition and colloquium titled 'Pathbreakers: The Twentieth Century Muslim Women of India' supported of UN Women. The aim was to develop an awareness of Muslim women who during and after the independence movement were at the forefront of nationalist and feminist discourse of the Indian subcontinent. The main body of their work has remained largely invisible/unrecognized and unsung. These women believed in the equality of genders and worked to make it a reality in a number of new domains. They set an example for others, breaking barriers to enter into public life and new professions.

The first exhibition and colloquium were held in May 2018 at India Habitat Centre. The exhibition received huge footfall and a lot of media attention stirring debates and discussions on the status of Muslim women of today in India. Video recordings of readings from writings of some of these authors, and voices from the new Pathbreakers was projected on screen and played on a loop.

The exhibition was taken to different locations across the country. Between 2018 to 2019, MWF organized Pathbreakers exhibition at different venues, details are given below:

Sl. No.	Date	Place and Particulars	Partners
1.	26-28 May 2018	New Delhi: India Habitat Centre, Lodhi Road	UN Women
2.	25 August - 25 September 2018	Ahmedabad, Gujarat: Confictorium Museum  A talk on <i>A New Vision for Muslim women, through Art and Poetry</i> by Dr. Syeda Hameed	UN Women, Confictorium Museum
3.	1 - 8 December 2018	New Delhi: India International Centre  Pathbreakers exhibition and a talk by Syeda Imam	UN Women, India International Centre
4.	19 June 2019	Edmonton, Alberta, Canada  Virtual exhibition and a unique presentation on Pathbreakers by Dr. Syeda Hameed	CCIM, Edmonton, Canada
5.	3- 7 August 2019	Hyderabad, Telangana Salar Jung Museum	COVA and TMREIS
6.	25 September - 25 October 2019	Kozikode, Kerala  Pathbreakers Exhibition and a National Seminar on Role of Muslim Women in National Struggles with Exhibition on Pathbreakers	Chair for Islamic Studies and Research, University of Calicut, JDT Islam, Kozhikode
7.	11 - 13 November 2019	New Delhi: Jawahar Bhawan, Dr. Rajendra Prasad Road	SBF/Jawahar Bhawan/RGF



The primary objective of this exhibition was to refute the stereotypes about Muslim women as being silent, cloistered and acquiescent. The exhibition featured 21 Muslim women who gave up purdah on the eve of Independence and became partners in building a new India. They believed in equal rights for women and propagated this belief through their work and their social engagement. **The banner-photographs along with their short descriptions aimed at providing a glimpse into this era to inspire the current and new generation.**

A freewheeling discussion was also organized alongside the exhibition to discuss the need to reclaim the lost narratives of Muslim women and take control of their representation. UN Women who believe Muslim Women in all their diversity are integral to the Sustainable Development Goals supported the exhibition and discussion.

In Hyderabad, the exhibition was held at Salar Jung Museum. The highlight was the Presentations made by young student volunteers about the Pathbreakers to the visitors that brought the legendary contributors to life again. The objective was to inspire youth- especially girls and women to emulate the Pathbreakers who made significant contributions for social transformations despite facing herculean odds and obstacles. Student visitors were inspired to draw and painted their overall experience. 50 of the outstanding drawings and paintings were selected by Mr. Ignatius Xavier, Ahimsa Artist for awarding the first, second, third and consolation prizes.





*Syeda Imam, writer and granddaughter of Tayeba Begum inaugurated the exhibition at IIC on 1 Dec 2018.*



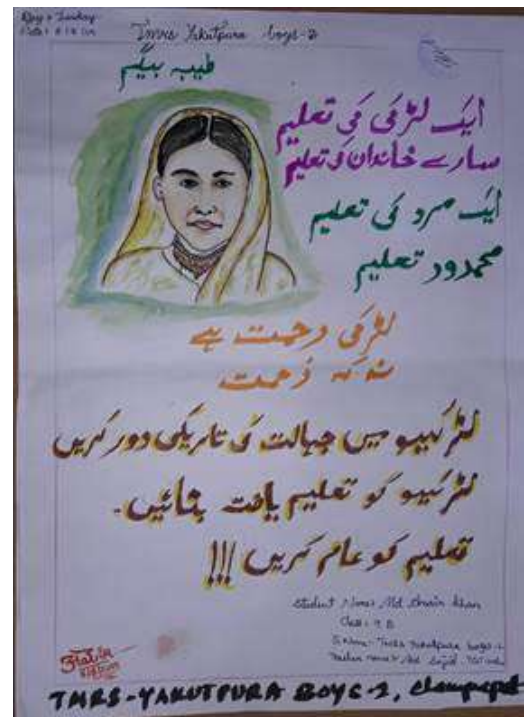
*Inaugural session of the exhibition at IIC Delhi*



*Visitor at India Habitat Centre, Delhi*

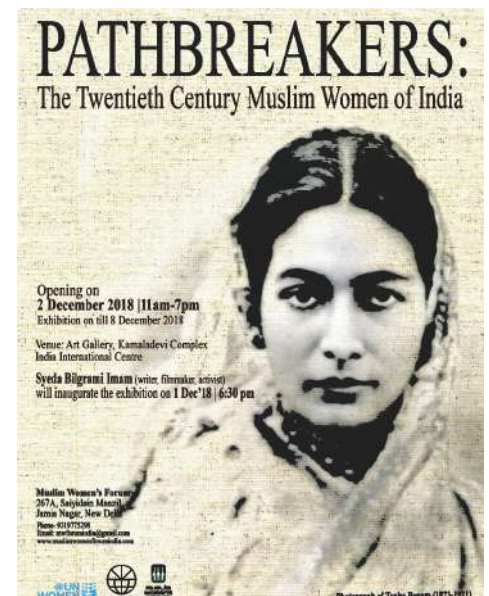


*Volunteers from JDT Islam: Orphanage & Educational Institution,, Kozhikode*



*'A Girl Child is a Blessing and not a Burden' A drawing and a Slogan made by Md. Amair Khan of Class 9th B, TMREIS Yakutpura Boys School- 2 at The Pathbreakers exhibition*





## Business Standard

### Beyond purdah: 20th century Muslim women who broke societal barriers

IANNS | New Delhi | May 29, 2018 Last Updated at 18:20 IST

Far from the commonly held impression of silenced, cloistered and acquiescent Muslim women, an exhibition reminds Indians of the post-Independence contribution of some women who became role models for new generations.

Titled "Pathbreakers", the exhibition was organised by Muslim Women's Forum in partnership with UN Women at India Habitat Centre to celebrate the struggles of those women who broke barriers and became partners in the project to build a new India.

"A multiplicity of stereotypes are constructed by diverse actors regarding Muslim women. But the fact is there is no undifferentiated 'mass' of Muslim Women. Like women of all socio-cultural groups, they too are a divergent, shifting composition of individuals, often dumped in popular parlance into one single heap. This homogenisation has to be rejected," Syeda Hameed, President, Muslim Women's Forum said.

Shedding their purdah, the Muslim women became writers, teachers, artists, scientists, lawyers, educators, political workers, trade unionists. A few even went to become MPs. MLA's and some represented India in international fora.

However, with a few exceptions, most of them have been forgotten in time.

"There is more to Muslim women than triple talaq, polygamy halala and purdah, and that this project hopes to bring a different image of Muslim women to the public consciousness. For the commonly held impression of silenced, cloistered and acquiescent women, Pathbreakers narrates the stories of strong, determined and engaged women," Hameed added.

The exhibition highlighted these women who were at the forefront of nationalist and feminist struggles. The main body of their work spanned from 1947 until the end of their lives who believed in equal rights for women and projected through their work and their social engagements.

From featuring writer activist from Uttar Pradesh Anis Kidwai to Sharifa Hamid Ali from Gujarat who was one of the founding members of All India Women's Conference (AIWC) and appointed as the Indian representative to the UN Commission on the status of women.

Other women who were featured in the exhibition are Atiya Fyze, Atia Hossain, Aziza Imam, Fathema Ismail, Hamida Habibullah, Hajira Begum, Mofida Ahmed, Masuma Begum, Mumtaz Jahan Haider, Qudsiya Aizaz Rasul, Qudsiya Zaidi, Razia Sajad Zaher, Saleha Abid Hussain, Saeda Khurshid, Safia Jan Nisar Akhtar, Siddiqua Kidwai, Surayya Tyabji, Zehra Ali Yavar Jung and Tyaba Khedive Jung.

— IANS

som/vm





### Visitor's Remarks:

*This is an extremely important initiative and I congratulate Muslim Women's Forum for putting this together so painstakingly. It gave me goose flesh and I was deeply moved. I suggest that it should be taken to all schools and a documentary should be made on these extraordinary people. I will be very happy to lend my voice. Thank you."* – Shabana Azmi, artist, actor and social activist.

*"A wonderful and timely exhibition. I thoroughly enjoyed poring over it. I wish all the books by these women were on sale here."* – Sheela Reddy, best-seller author and columnist.

*"What an amazing collection of photographs and writings of some truly substantial Muslim women who lit up their surroundings and left a lasting impression on the country. Hearty congratulations!"* – Abbas Ali Baig, best known Indian cricketer.



## Inspiring tales of legendary Muslim 'Pathbreakers'

'Pathbreakers', an exhibition, which was held at Salar Jung Museum, Hyderabad was all about the 20<sup>th</sup> century Muslim women, who broke barriers and contributed to building of a new India

M M FAROOQUI

**E**xhibition titled 'Pathbreakers: The Twentieth Century Muslim Women of India' was organised by Muslim Women's Forum, New Delhi, COVA and TMREIS (Telangana Minorities Residential Educational Institutions Society) at Salar Jung Museum, Hyderabad.

The exhibition displayed photos of 21 Muslim women, who gave up purdah on the eve of independence and became partners in building a new India. The main body of their work spanned from 1947 until the end of the century and has remained largely invisible, unrecognised and unsung.

"The main objective of organising the exhibition and the panel discussion is to inspire youth, especially girls and women to emulate the 'Pathbreakers', who made significant contributions for social transformation despite facing herculean odds and obstacles," said Mazhar Hussain, executive director, COVA.

At the launch, AK Khan, advisor to the Government of Telangana, and Dr Syeda Hameed, former member, Planning Commission, Government of India and Presi-



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**Muslim women who gave up purdah on the eve of independence and became partners in building a new India, who have remained largely invisible, unrecognised and unsung, are featured in the photo exhibition**

There were two panel discussions that were organised during the launch. Some of the Muslim women pathbreakers of the 21st Century from Hyderabad, Syeda Falak (Karate Champion), Syeda Salva Fatima (Pilot) and Nikhat Zareen (boxing sensation) were also present for the event. Around 450 students from TMREIS and surrounding schools and colleges visited the exhibition, which was open to general visitors. Eminent experts from different fields Dr Safia Mehdi from Delhi, Prof Ismath Mehdi, Dr Avdesh Rani, Dr

Ameena Tahseen and Prof Salma Farooqui from MANUU, Dr Anand Raj Varma, K Vimala, Veda Kumar, Dr B V Subba Rao and Dilnaz Baig attended the event. They spoke about the contribution of the Muslim women around and after independence in the spheres of politics, education, social transformation, culture and literature. They also spoke about aspects of governance, harmony, culture, literature etc. in the history of Hyderabad.

"During and after independence many Muslim women joined the project of rebuilding India. They became writers, teachers, artists, scientists, lawyers, educators, political workers and trade unionists. A few became MP's, MLA's and some represented India in International forums. 'Pathbreakers' present some of these women who were at the forefront of nationalist and feminist struggles through their work and their social engagements. They worked along with men during the most challenging times inspired by the work of Gandhi, Nehru and Azad. There were and are hundreds of such Muslim women across the country. Hence the idea of the exhibition is also to break the stereotype of Muslim women as victims of triple talaq, polygamy, burqa, halala," says Mazhar Hussain.





*Presentations conducted by young student volunteers about the Pathbreakers to the visitors that brought the legendary contributors to life again.*



*Students from JDT Islam New Hope English School, Kozhikode, visited Pathbreakers exhibition with their teachers*



*Pathbreakers exhibition at JDT Islam, Kozhikode*



*The First Pathbreakers exhibition was held in May 2018 at India Habitat Centre, Delhi*



*Pathbreakers exhibition & seminar inaugural programme at JDT Islam, Kozhikode*



## ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION ON MUSLIM WOMEN: RIGHTS AND REALITY (CHARTING OUT AN ACTION PROGRAMME)

**Venue:** *Magnolia Hall, India Habitat Centre, Delhi*  
**Date:** *July 4, 2018*



Muslim Women's Forum in partnership with Majlis, Mumbai organized a Round table deliberation on the rights of Muslim women within the larger context of issues concerning the Muslim community. The participants also commemorated Justice Rajinder Sachar, whose unwavering commitment to rights of all Minorities, and especially Muslim Women, was exemplary.

Despite rights given to women in Islam, and despite several positive rulings such as Shamim Ara in 2002 and Danial Latifi in 2001, which have secured the rights of Muslim women, sadly it has become embedded in public consciousness that Islam is anti-women and Muslim women are devoid of rights. When this becomes the only focal point of public debates, it invisibilises several social, economic and livelihood deprivations faced by Muslim women, and more generally, the Muslim community, which were the stark and shocking findings of Justice Sachar in his report published in 2007. Rather unfortunately, despite these findings and despite the fact that there are several forums which Muslim women can access to secure their rights, the ground reality is that most Muslim women are unaware of their rights and do not have the means of accessing them due to poverty, illiteracy and other community based constraints.

The round table consultation aimed to open up the discussion regarding practical aspects of reaching out to women in the community. The main objective was for the deliberations to help chart out a course of action and a way forward so that awareness about Muslim women's rights reaches out to those who are in need of it the most.







*The roundtable consultation was not confined to only Muslims but included experts from various fields since Muslim women are integral to the larger project of Secular India and what affects them is a matter of concern for all. It was also jointly planned with scholars who are fellow travellers – Prof Faizan Mustafa, VC, NALSAR, Hyderabad, Prof A. Shaban, Deputy Director, TISS and Adv. Irfan Engineer, Centre for Study of Society and Secularism (CSSS), Mumbai, among others.*

## ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION ON MUSLIM WOMEN: RIGHTS AND REALITY (CHARTING OUT AN ACTION PROGRAMME)

**Venue:** Convention Hall, Mehdiapatnam, Hyderabad

**Date:** 28 August 2018

**Collaborators:** Majlis, Mumbai, Prof. Aamir Ullah Khan, Member, Sudhir Commission, Govt of Telangana, along with various local organisations.

This Roundtable was convened to carry forward the deliberations held in Delhi on 4th July 2018. More than 70 delegates participated in the deliberations. The presentations and discussions that followed were intense and nuanced and helped a great deal in broadening the concerns of Muslim women beyond polygamy and triple talaq. The most important concerns, namely, the social and economic backwardness of the community, were foregrounded. The concern to draft and popularize a model nikahnama in order to curb triple talaq and polygamy as an initiative from within the community was raised. As well as, concerns over enactment of a Uniform Civil Code were discussed with the Chairperson of the Law Commission, Justice B.S. Chauhan, while Prof. Faizan Mustafa discussed the recent Supreme Court ruling on Triple Talaq. Towards the end of the deliberations, an Action Plan was drawn up to take forward some of the concerns which were articulated. (Copy of the report of the deliberations is available on request).

The deliberation invited more grassroots interventions from activists and presented and assessed the progress made since the Delhi meet in July. Mr. Harsh Mander and Ms. Shabnam Hashmi, who have initiated broad national level campaigns to secure peace and harmony among people at the grass roots spoke at the inaugural session.

Finally, the meeting helped to create a broad network of individuals and organisations who can work towards strengthening the secular and democratic fabric of our country, spread the message of peace and harmony and secure the rights of women and children from marginalised communities

## LEADERSHIP AND CAPACITY BUILDING TRAINING FOR MUSLIM WOMEN (2018 – PRESENT)

MWF supported by the Dalit Foundation started the above-mentioned project in August 2018. For this, the organization engaged two Programme Coordinators. By May 2019, MWF have already identified and trained 15 Muslim Women from 5 locations. from Barpeta (Assam), Koraon (UP), Chattarpur (Madhya Pradesh), Jaitpur Extension (Delhi). Presently, MWF have a total of 12 Fellows working at the grassroots.

**Background:** More and more women struggle on a day-to-day basis to break out from the shackles of oppression, dependence and discrimination. Muslim women too, need to build a sustained leadership to include their voices as change makers in the society. Economic independence offers impetus to contribute socially. Therefore, a combination of leadership and skill building training is an effort to help women to empower themselves.

Young Muslim women seeking economic independence with an intention to empower other Muslim women to become change makers in the community

**Perspective Building & Vocational Training:** This includes building their perspectives in the areas of Human rights, Health and Sanitation, Socioeconomic political and analysis and understanding the historicity of Muslim women, Gender sensitization training, Legal education on woman-specific laws, Communication skills, Organising and public engagement, Computer skill training and financial literacy training. In addition, each one will select one vocational training course from the option provided such as videography, photography, beautician, tailoring, bakery, police training, computer tally, and mobile repairing etc. Trainings are provided by the Dalit Shakti Kendra, Sanand, Ahmedabad.

After the training, MWF provided hand-holding support to the trainees directly as well as through partner organisations. The Fellows identified their area of interest and carry forward their work within the community. A stipend of Rs. 7500/- per month is given to them when they joined MWF as a Fellow. This is to support the grassroot work that they are undertaking in their own areas.

So, the Fellows became representatives of MWF in their respective locations: to hear out the marginalized women in their communities as well as build rapport with the women. There are to build /mobilize their constituencies which would be Muslim women, men and young people from other vulnerable groups, organize them on issues of entitlements, link them with livelihood training. Thus, building a cadre of grass root leaders. They would take the discourse on issues of Muslim women and provide the reality check to MWF both with data and narratives so that MWF can voice their concerns at the National Level.

**The Implementation:** MWF coordinated with partner organization for the selection and identification of young women for capacity building training. The selected candidates are being interviewed by MWF before we send them for their training at DSK. For this, the team travelled to Tezpur, Guwahati, Koraon, Jhansi, Bhopal, Chhattarpur, and Ahmedabad to conduct an orientation programme and held an interactive session with both the candidates and their parents. We met over 24 candidates who applied for the programme. The first phase of the training started in September 2018. The second phase training, which started on 15 March 2019, saw a drastic increase from 3 volunteers in 2018 to 12 Muslim women volunteers in 2019. Out of total 15 women, 12 of them continued to work with MWF.



*Rukaiya, Asma and Khushi selected by MWF for leadership & Capacity training at DSK*



*An evening talk with Rukaiya, Asma, and Khushi where they shared their experience at DSK with Dr. Monisha Behal, Dr. Tazeen Mahmood, Ms. Johanna Lokhande, Ms. Salina Wilson and Ms. Sahla Nechiyil. Date: 15 November 2018*



MWF Team visited different locations in Assam, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Delhi to meet interested candidates for our Capacity building training. With the support of different civil society organisations and different individuals including Dalit Shakti Kendra, North East Network, Tezpur District Mahila Samiti, Chhatarpur Mahila Jagriti Manch, Afsar Jahan, Manjuwara Mullah, Abdul Kalam – MWF selected 15 women for the capacity training.



*Sahla Nechiyil, MWF Programme Coordinator went to remote villages near Koraon to meet potential candidates for Capacity training.*



*Ruth and Sahla went to Guwahati and Tezpur to meet candidates from Barpeta, Kokrajar, and Sonitpur. Many expressed their inability to attend the training during election time for fear of being identified as D-Voter.*



*Reyaz and Ruth met Rajiya, Rihana and Ambreen from Chhatarpur, MP at Jhansi*



*12 Candidates from Assam, MP, UP, Delhi for the Capacity Building Training arrived at Delhi where they were greeted by MWF mentors, Dr. Zohra Hussaini, Begum Zakia Zaheer, and Dr. Safia Mehdi*



## OVERVIEW OF THE PROJECT: Leadership & Capacity Building Training for Muslim Women

At DSK, MWF Fellows performed brilliantly. Hameeda Parbin from Assam, who since childhood had never been permitted to go out of the house to run or to play a game was this batch's most outstanding sportsperson and walked away with the best sportsperson award. Afsana, who had never spoken a word in any Forum anywhere was orator number one. And Amreen Bano who was the best essayist of the batch spoke with passion about social justice and violence against women. Ambreen spoke about how DSK expanded the horizons of her mind. "Before coming here, when we looked at the mirror, we saw our own faces. But the mirror DSK held up for us was 'Mirror of Truth'. We saw the world in its reflection."

Upon the completion of their training Fellows went back to their villages, started opening a library from their home where children come to read and learn. Baseline Survey Format was also prepared, and Fellows have already covered around 700 households. MWF also formed a group where volunteers could share their work.

# Five women on rights mission

**GAURAVDAS**

**Guwahati:** Five Muslim women from Barpeta district in lower Assam are on a mission to spread rights awareness among the women of their community to help them with citizenship issues.

The women especially want to help those poor and illiterate women of their community in rural Barpeta who have been "arbitrarily" marked D or doubtful voter or against whom "false objections" have been filed during the National Register of Citizens (NRC) update process.

The five, some of whom are victims of child marriage and some are students, were helped by Manjuwara Mullah, collaborator with Barpeta-based citizenship rights group

Sambidhan Sevak, and Shahjahan Ali Ahmed of the Association for Protection of Indian Citizenship Rights (APICR), to get training in the structure of citizenship rights, with special focus on D-voters, NRC, its claims and objections process and how child marriage affects women especially in terms of citizenship rights.

The women, who come from economically underprivileged families and showed interest in the mission, were sent to Dalit Shakti Kendra in Gujarat for two months to train in leadership development. Back in their district and respective villages, the women will now embark upon their special mission.

The women, who underwent rigorous training on constitutional rights in Gujarat,



Shahjahan Ali Ahmed meets the women

are now ready to fight for the rights of rustic, poor, illiterate Muslim women in Barpeta district. Their special focus will be women arbitrarily declared D-voters, against whom false NRC objections have been

filed and those excluded from the NRC because of child marriage. They will make these "powerless" women aware of their rights and equip them with the means to contest their cases. "It will be a continuous

process," Mullah said.

Most child brides take the family names of their husbands and have no address/document to prove their father's legacy. After getting married, they get a panchayat certificate. This became a bone of contention during the NRC process when it was rejected as a valid document for inclusion in the NRC.

"Women married before the age of 18 are among the victims of citizenship exclusion. We found such women to have been declared D-voter and excluded from NRC. Having just the panchayat certificate as an available document renders them helpless. Child marriages lead to age discrepancy and citizenship exclusion. Besides, being illiterate narrows down options," Ahmed said.



*Fellows from Barpeta started their community interventions near the banks of Brahmaputra river soon after the completion of their training.*



## Stories of Change

**'Meri Kahaani, Meri Zubaani'**

**Written by Hameeda Parbin, Barpeta, Assam**

"A social worker from my village introduced me to Munjuwara Mullah, who told me about Muslim Women's Forum and the Capacity Training that they are organizing for Muslim women from Assam. I was very interested. This is also the first time I heard about Dalit Shakti Kendra, where the training was to be held. All my travels and logistics were taken care of by MWF.

Before going to DSK, I was a housewife, and like many other girls from my community, I too faced a lot of life's challenges. As a young girl, I needed permission from adult members of my family for everything I do. Even as a child, I was also not allowed to play outside and often got beating because of that. In my village, harassment often begins when a girl goes to her in-law's house. I too faced the same problem. This is why I wanted to join the training, so that I will be able to learn to stand up for myself. As a young girl, I dreamt of becoming an honest police officer. Though I tried very hard, unfortunately it was not meant to be. However, some of my other dreams got fulfilled when I joined the training. It was also the first time I left my village

At DSK I get to meet people who inspired me to work hard, developed my self-confidence, and utterly changed my thoughts and behaviour for the better. I took beautician training course as my vocational course. I participated in all the sports and extracurricular activities. Earlier I can only speak in Assamese, now I am able to communicate in Hindi with other girls from different states. I never used to dance before, but for the first time on 14th April 2018, on Baba Saheb's birthday, fellows from Assam showcased our Assamese traditional dance. It was very liberating for me. When I received the best sportsperson award; it was the happiest day of my life and I felt like part of my dreams came true that day. Back in my village, my family members, and friends were curious to know more about the training. I know that in future I would also like to impart some of the skills and knowledge I learnt from DSK. I finally overcome my fear of public speaking. My general awareness of human rights, social well-being, rights of women increased. I never knew that I had this ability to learn so many new things before, but now I feel it is what makes me strong. Now I feel free from my fears and insecurities. I never used to look forward to what I will do in the future, but now I have decided to be more self-reliant. I noticed there has not been much development in my village for a long time. I have spoken to young girls and women to know more about their conditions. I feel both their conditions and thoughts are not healthy. They feel helpless, but I can try to change that. I would like women in my village to be aware of their rights. To change society's patriarchal thoughts and communicate to them that woman can do just as well as man if given the same opportunity. This message I will take it with me everywhere I go. This is will be my work and my identity. Library: I have set up a small library in my house using the books I received from DSK. Many children from my locality came and I helped them with their reading exercises. I taught them about cleanliness. I played games and dance with them. I really enjoyed doing all these with the children."



**Pic 1: Hameeda received the Best Sportsperson Award at DSK from Mr. Gagan Sethi**



**Pic 2: Hameeda like all the other MWF Fellows opened a library for the children in her own areas with books she received from DSK.**



**Pic 3: MWF Fellows and many women from Barpeta meet to talk about women's health, hygiene and education**

## Stories of Change

### Meri Kahaani, Meri Zubaani

Written by Rajiya Khatoon, Chhatarpur, MP

*"I came to know about Muslim Women's Forum and the Leadership & Capacity Building Training for Muslim Women organised by MWF from Afsar Jahan didi. Ruth and Reyaz from MWF conducted my interview in Jhansi on 28 February 2019. That is also how I learnt about Dalit Shakti Kendra (DSK). I used to work in a call centre for five years. But I thought that if I want to make a difference, I should join this training. I am very grateful to MWF for this opportunity.*

*At DSK, everything was well organized. We were encouraged to participate in all the activities, reading exercise, photography class, group discussions, morning exercise, cleaning and cooking etc. My gratitude to Martin Bhai, Pradip Bhai, Indu didi and Neelu didi for the capacity training, the kind which has never been made available to us before. The training transformed me to be an independent and free thinking person I always wanted to be. Meeting girls from 18 states of India, learning with them, discussing the social issues of different communities helped me to understand my own social issues better. I also took beauty parlor training as my vocational course. Reena didi trained us for two months. When Reena took a 10 days leave of absence, I taught the class in her absence. That makes me proud.*

*Three of us girls from Chhatarpur travelled back from Ahmedabad to our respective villages surrounded by unknown people in the train, for me this was an achievement, we acquired so much courage. It would not have been possible before. After getting back home I started visiting the Anganwadi centre in Chhatarpur, Ward no 37 and Deri Road Bidi Colony to conduct survey for MWF and from there I moved on to other villages. I held meetings of girls and formed a group, built a library, taught children in my library. I would like to continue to work for empowerment of women in my community."*



Now Rajiya Khatoon and Rehana Khatoon are at the forefront of the Save The Constitution Campaign in their areas. They opened library for children, helped them with their schoolwork. To the adolescent group, they gave a beauty parlour training, the skill they learned from DSK and use it to engaged the young girls who had come there. They also help re-enrolled more than 9 children back into school.

They mentioned how atmosphere at their own home have changed ever since they came back from the training. Because of their commitment, they slowly gained supports from male members of the family who were earlier skeptical about the work they were doing. They mentioned how their brother who never used to help when it comes to domestic work before, is now helping their parents in their absence. It is a small step, but for girls like Rajiya and Rehana, it was everything.

We, at MWF agree with the saying that change begins at home. We believe that if we want to change a community we must start with ourselves and apply what we learn to society. The story of Rajiya and Rehana is one such example. The baton needs to be passed on.



## KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

- MWF has achieved a thorough understanding of the complex diversity of Muslim women, their issues in the community and various factors influencing their status. This also triggered the thought of having an extensive network across the country so that we can support a larger number of Muslim women who are equipped with mobilizing, research and advocacy skills. With our Leadership and Capacity Building training project, MWF is now able to work on establishing its first unit in Assam, and subsequently in UP and MP as well.
- MWF is breaking certain stereotypes about Islam and Muslim women through our workshop like 'Understanding Islam', and exhibition and colloquium on 'Pathbreakers: The Twentieth Century Muslim Women of India.'
- MWF increase its social media presence to engage with listeners, respond to those who reach out and also draw in a wider pool of people who would not have necessarily known about our activities otherwise. An important aspect of this initiative was to present platform even for a small voice to be heard.
- MWF official website [www.muslimwomenforumindia.com](http://www.muslimwomenforumindia.com) was created and launched in October 2018.
- MWF participated in events around social justice involving other vulnerable groups. This is in fulfillment of its mandate, not to restrict itself only to Muslim personal law issues but also matters that affect the secular community, other minorities and marginalized groups.
- The Forum encouraged its members to attend various training and information related programmes to keep itself abreast with the trends and situation prevailing in the country.
- By the end of December 2019, MWF Fellows from Koraon, Chhatarpur, Barpeta, and Tezpur have already covered MWF baseline survey in their own areas covering upto 900 households.

## CHALLENGES AND OBSTACLES

- One of the major challenges we faced was the ignorance of Muslim women about the essence of Islam and Quran. As a result, they are easily misguided by orthodox interpretations they get from the mohalla madaras. MWF's programme is to make Muslim women aware of their rights under Quran and the Shariat towards social adjustment, change, and accommodation.
- A lot of Muslim girls are denied education due to social, economic and religious reasons and are also not allowed to go out of their homes for valid purposes. This has affected our leadership-training course.
- To document the regional diversity and local factors, which operate for Muslims as they do for other groups in the country.
- To raise voice for making education for the Muslim girl child the top most priority at every level of governance - local, state, centre. Persuade parents to send their daughters to schools by convincing them that education is an important tools for social and economic transformation and advancement for their children.
- Human Resource deficit: MWF does not have adequate human resources to meet the above-mentioned challenges.

## LESSONS LEARNED AND INSIGHTS

- In the quest of documenting the status of Muslim women, MWF headed by Dr. Syeda Hameed had travelled across the country—from metro cities like Chennai, Trivandrum, Bangalore and Mumbai to smaller cities like Tezpur, Kozhikode, Bhopal, to small talukas like Reshampura in Gwalior, Hariya ki Ghari in Mathura, Sudaka in Mewat and Nehtaur in Bijnore—conducting public hearings on problems of Muslim women. At these hearings we heard harrowing tales about early marriage, triple Talaq, polygamy, mehr and maintenance. Stories of teenage sisters who made suicide pacts because they were pulled out of school for early marriages.
- Little had changed even after 19 years. MWF would like to revisit these places. Conduct surveys, group discussions, and interviews to make an assessment of the overall socio-economic conditions in these places (education, girl-child education, the condition of women, livelihood opportunities, jobs, income, civic amenities, healthcare, schools, etc.) Our new Volunteers will be able to help support the organization in reaching out to the remote and vulnerable communities.

- The need to prepare a report to highlight the condition of the Muslim families in these places and the neglect/poor implementation of the government programmes.
- The need to come up with a systematic and theoretical framework to understand the issues that affect the lives of Muslim women.
- To bring Muslim women (their status in Islam and present condition within and outside the community) into public discourse, would serve the dual purpose of removing the sting from minds of non-Muslims who see Muslim women with prejudice as well as bringing Muslim women themselves into the national mainstream.
- Based on the organization's several interactions with individuals, civil society groups and grassroots workers in recent past, MWF put forward its own agenda for 2019:

- ⇒ **Schemes for development of minorities and minority women:** (1). Analyse budgets to understand where the money earmarked for welfare of minorities is being spent. (2). Pressurise State Governments to deliver on gender related promises and schemes for minorities and women.
- ⇒ **Countering the negative projection of Muslims in popular and social media:** Conduct workshops in schools and colleges on secularism and cultural diversity to expose the youth to this concept. Make a concrete plan to counter the media's role in polarizing people.
- ⇒ **Community Development:** (1). Set aside a portion of the Zakat fund for the welfare of destitute and single women and for education of children from the marginalised sections. (2). Work towards improving Urdu medium schools. (3). Set up 'Women Only' institutions of higher education
- ⇒ **Taking forward the model Nikahnama debate:** (1). Initiate dialogue with AIMPLB as to how to take forward the issue of a model Nikahnama since a seal of approval from the Board will help to spread the message. (2). Nikahnama is not a 'model'; it is a dynamic working draft which can be modified to suit the needs of individuals. How do we spread this message among the Qazis and the general public? (3). Darul Qaza's are arbitration forums and hence the need to have trained women counselors to help in dispute resolution. (4). Collect data on the functioning of jamaats, village- based panchayats etc. on the procedures followed for granting divorce, or settling disputes.
- ⇒ **Working towards Setting up Institutional Mechanisms:** (1). Bring back the Anti-Communal Violence Bill. (2). Set up Equal Opportunity Commission
- ⇒ **General:** (1). Work towards creating a broad-based secular platform to address issues concerning women from minority communities. (2). Encourage NGOs and other groups to collect basic data at the local level keeping in view local factors that are affecting women's access to education, health facilities etc. so that specific need-based projects and programmes can be developed. (3). Document the regional diversity and local factors which operate for Muslims as they do for other groups in the country.

## PLANS FOR THE NEXT 6-12 MONTHS

- Reclaim leadership of our own agenda: Decide the next steps that the group will take. Meet at least once every quarter with other Civil Society groups to assess our progress and change tracks if necessary. Prepare a list of 100 Muslim women working at the grass roots or those working towards empowerment of Muslim women who can be part of this initiative to spread the message.
- MWF is planning to take the Understanding Islam workshop to other cities. We are hoping to offer internship.
- For Understanding Islam workshop - MWF will develop a curriculum, reading materials, identify prospective people who could become our trainers. Develop criteria for selection of these trainers. Training of trainers: Identify young trainers from colleges and other areas. Plan a series of workshops where these trainers would go to identified areas and impart the knowledge.
- Make out a plan to promote the education of Muslim women and girls at all levels. Conduct workshops in schools and colleges on secularism and cultural diversity to expose the youth to this concept.
- To work for getting representation of Muslim women not only in bodies like Haj committee, Waqf board but other influential bodies at various levels.
- MWF will regularly check with the fellows - to assess their performance post training. Encourage them to visit PDS shops, Anganwadi, health centre, schools, etc. and observe, interact and prepare report based on their visit. They should also use these visits as an opportunity to engaged with the community and establish contacts with the local administration and civil society organisations already working in similar areas.



- Encourage NGOs and other groups to collect basic data at the local level keeping in view local factors that are affecting women's access to education, health facilities etc. so that specific need based projects and programmes can be developed.
- To increase outreach - Form a unit for MWF in the respective localities of our volunteers. For a start at Tezpur and Delhi, then Chattarpur (MP), Koraon (UP), Barpeta (Assam).

*MWF Fellows visited villages near the banks of Brahmaputra river in Assam to conduct MWF baseline survey*



*Fellows visited schools and community centre, interacted with children, and women about sanitation, health in Chhatrapur and Koraon.*



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