

## **A new women's organisation brings changes in misogynist discourse and practice in Usta Mohammed (SG)**

*'We wanted to do something, but did not know how to proceed. Meeting you [the WEMC team] was like a ray of light that showed us a way.'* Nur Jahan, founder of *Nissa Development and Welfare Organisation*<sup>46</sup>

Usta Mohammed, one of Shirkat Gah-WEMC's primary research sites in the Balochistan province of Pakistan is a Tehsil of Jaffarabad District in the southeast part of the province. Bordering Sindh, Usta is even more acutely cut off from development than many other parts of Balochistan. The largely Sindhi-speaking population is divided into various tribes and subtribes amongst which the Jamalīs, Syeds, and Bugtis. Local traditions greatly restrict women, who are rarely allowed to step out into the public domain without male relatives, even in the case of a health emergency. Power wielders, imposing notions of tribal culture, lay claim to any bodily integrity of women in the name of honour and justify murder and the control of women. The degree of control on women's sexuality is manifest in the number of women declared "*kari*" or "blackened one" (55 women identified for 2008) referring to their fall from moral grace due to illicit sexual relations. These women simply vanish – either killed or sold off.

Starting research in August 2007, Shirkat Gah is currently focused on taking field findings back to community members. To promote local responses to misogynist cultural practices and gender relations, the female-male WEMC team has led discussions, seminars, workshops, theatre enactments, poetry, and students' writing competitions. The change, particularly visible amongst the younger generation the team interacts with, is evident. After ground-breaking WEMC events in March 2009, (See WEMC Annual Report 2008-9), international and national NGOs approached SG expressing gratitude for opening the means to work in this difficult and hitherto inaccessible area, and asking for assistance.<sup>47</sup>

Key to change is the WEMC catalysed women's organization, *Nissa Welfare and Development Organization*, (and a college students' group, *Savera* or Dawn) ensuring the change catalyst is located within - and thus integral to - the community, the best guarantor of future sustainability. The genesis of *Nissa*, set up by Nur Jahan, is a WEMC focus group discussion on empowerment she happened upon and became excited about. Joining research activities and actively encouraged and supported by WEMC, Nur established *Nissa* with her husband and others in May 2009. *Nissa* is transforming gender rules in this poverty-stricken tradition-bound area and has become a magnetic hub for women's activities: district health workers gravitate to its office, the woman councilor from the adjacent Union Council 4 requested a branch in her UC. *Nissa* facilitated women's access to the government Benazir Support Scheme identifying deserving women for the councilor. The councilor and *Nissa* are opening women's livelihood options through such schemes and order work. *Nissa* trained women have opened two beauty salons, and two computer training centres for young women - this, in a context where women warned more women were expected to be killed or sold off given the forecast of a poor rice harvest. At the wider meso level, *Nissa* broke tradition to enable 5 couples, marrying without family approval, to return/remain in the area without being killed soon after Usta made national and international headlines with the murder of four women alleged (incorrectly) to have been buried alive for alleged "sexual misdemeanor." WEMC capacity building on gender, legal matters, obtaining identity cards, on organizational development etc. strengthens *Nissa* as a support and resource for women in its own community and beyond (e.g. Nur was invited as a gender trainer in another city.) *Nissa* is both extremely active and resourceful. It ensured that the WEMC- film, *A Small Dream*, ran for ten consecutive days on local cable television.

<sup>46</sup> Shirkat Gah Report of WEMC meeting, 24 March 2009, Usta Mohammad,

<sup>47</sup> For example, Marie Stopes, Strengthening Participatory Organisations, and Mercy Corps.