

# INTERVIEW

## EQUALITY NOW

*The following conversation with lawyers Jessica Neuwirth and Surita Sandosham, women's rights activists and founders of the international women's rights monitoring organization, Equality Now, took place in Manhattan in September.*

**Laurie King-Irani:** Can you tell us what event or idea led to the establishment of Equality Now? Who decided to form this international organization devoted to monitoring and protecting the human rights of women world-wide?

**Jessica Neuwirth:** Although particular events sparked the creation of Equality Now, a few of us activists had been thinking about such an organization for a long time. I founded the organization with two other women, a lawyer from South Africa and a lawyer from Iran, whom I knew through working with the international human rights movement. All of us had come to the realization that an immense gap existed concerning women's human rights' violations and the way that international human rights organizations were dealing with these violations. Women's rights were not, in fact, being adequately addressed, but we saw that the techniques and strategies of these international organizations could be effective if applied exclusively to women's rights issues.

One of the first stories that affected us and galvanized our efforts was that of Amina, a young girl from Hyderabad in India who had been sold into marriage at the age of nine. Unlike so many other girls, she was rescued from this forced marriage only by a fortunate accident. Her "husband", an older, wealthy Saudi businessman, had taken her on the airplane from India to Saudi Arabia. Amina was visibly distraught during the flight, and an Indian flight attendant asked her why she was so upset. Upon learning of her plight, the flight attendant informed the authorities of her sale into marriage when the flight landed. The man was arrested, and Amina was sent back to her family in India. This case received a great deal of international media attention, but we were very concerned about Amina's fate upon returning to India. Media attention is terrific, but it comes and goes in a flash, and we were fearful that Amina could easily be sold again to another wealthy businessman, because there is no legal framework or monitoring to protect young girls and women like Amina on a long-term basis. In so many areas of the world, women and girls are being sold everyday like chattel. Most people in the human rights movement were simply unaware of this fact and all of

the related social, economic and psychological issues surrounding it. Thus, we saw a real need for an effective grassroots activism that had worked so well in freeing prisoners of conscience and halting torture. The same approach could and should be used to raise awareness about women's human rights and their violation.

That was how and why we founded Equality Now in 1992. Although we are a fairly new organization, we have grown quite rapidly. Increasing numbers of people are realizing that there is a gap in human rights work focused on women, and we are constantly reaching out to new groups and individuals who are not necessarily human rights activists, but just ordinary citizens and coalitions who are so outraged when they read media reports about the sale of children, the burning of Indian widows, or the circumcision of young girls in Africa that they want to do something, so we tap into that energy and use it to actually make a difference.

**LKI:** How do you reach out to all of these disparate groups and individuals? Do you have branch offices in various regions of the world?

**Surita Sandosham:** We are based in New York City, but our Board is international. We have representatives from Africa, South America, and the Caribbean, and I am from Singapore. Our strategy is to work with groups and individuals in the countries where the human rights violations are occurring. Based on their information and their documentation, along with our research to verify the facts, we put together action alerts, which we then send out to our 2,000 members in 75 different countries. We mobilize people and organizations throughout the world to take action of various kinds depending on the situation. In the recent case of the young Togolese woman, Fauziya Kasinga, who sought political asylum in the USA on the grounds that female circumcision, *i.e.*, female genital mutilation, is a form of torture, we sent out an action alert which was very effective. Another case was that of a young woman, Maricris Sioson, who had left her home in the Philippines to work as an entertainer in Japan. Less than a year later, her body was returned to her family by the Japanese government, who stated that she had died of natural causes. Upon opening the casket, however, her family discovered that her body was badly bruised and showed signs of deep stab wounds in and around the genital area. So clearly, she did not die of natural causes! Here, our strategy was to work with various non-governmental organizations in the

Philippines to encourage the Japanese Government to investigate the case and prosecute those responsible for her death. Whenever there is an opportunity to raise awareness about violations of women's human rights, we do all we can to raise it. We even tried to tie this case into the issue of Korean "comfort" women, *i.e.*, women who had been forced into prostitution by the Japanese Army during World War II.

**JN:** We always try to choose a case that is very specific, so that people can relate to it in an immediate and personal way, but at the same time, a case that addresses larger issues and general practices that we want to highlight. So, depending on the case, or the nature of the issue, we might be calling for new legislation, or the implementation of existing legislation. Or, we might call for something altogether different, but in every instance, we try to be creative and find new ways to tackle these problems effectively.

**LKI:** A major human rights violation affecting millions of women throughout the world is that of domestic violence. Since this form of abuse usually occurs in the privacy of the home, it is very hard to monitor or legislate practices concerning domestic violence, which, according to a recent UN report, is tantamount to torture in its effects and repercussions on women and society. How would you go about dealing with this issue?

**JN:** We did do at least one important action on a domestic violence case here in the United States. It concerned a judge who was sentencing a man who had murdered his wife upon discovering her in bed with another man. The judge gave him a light sentence and said, "I shudder to think what I would have done in your position." We found this outrageous. This concept of honor killing — which is

universal — implies that a woman is a man's property, so murdering her for an infraction of his ownership rights somehow mitigates, or even cancels, his punishment. Honor killings raise the crucial question of equal protection under the law, it represents clear discrimination against women, and that is our starting point: The law is there to protect

everyone equally. If you are being battered by a husband or a brother and you call the police, they have to respond to your request for help as they would anyone else's request. So, we always start from a legal perspective: the law should be enforced, but if there is no law concerning domestic violence (such as cases of marital rape), then that should be changed and a law should be created and enforced. What we usually do not address is the psychological issues of battered women who are not yet ready to ask for help. This is a very hard decision, but I think that the psychological dimension really ought to be addressed by local, rather than international, organizations. We try to build awareness and concern and to facilitate exchanges of

information between various groups concerning strategies and solutions for domestic violence.

**SS:** Where domestic violence is concerned, there usually are local groups engaged in efforts to halt it, and we do not want to duplicate efforts, thereby wasting time and money. We would rather be able to think strategically about how best to raise the issue, how to do something positive and effective to make a change.

**JN:** Also, a lot of people think that domestic violence is something that only happens in the privacy of the home, and indeed, that is where the actual beating usually takes place, but there is a complex, interlocking official hierarchy that



supports and condones domestic violence. When a judge tells a wife-batterer or a wife-killer, "well, I ought to punish you, but I probably would have done the same thing you did..." , then that sends out the wrong message. At the very least, it encourages violence; it is an official statement on behalf of the state that killing is an acceptable way of dealing with marital infidelity.

**LKI:** Attitudes are key here. You would have to change not only the laws, but the ways people think, judge, value and decide. That means you would have to affect socialization processes, *i.e.*, the ways men and women learn what is and is not appropriate behavior.

**JN:** But our approach, though not explicitly educational, may be a very good way to influence gender socialization. If you get into that courtroom and hear the judge say, "well, this isn't really a crime," that is a message that will prevent other abused women from ever going to court. People are always complaining that women don't report domestic violence. Well, maybe they don't report it because they know that they are going to be told "it was your fault; you asked for it". Hearing this is like a second human rights abuse, in addition to the battering! If we can inspire women to have confidence in the legal system's ability to work for them and their protection, this may change attitudes, and, we hope, behaviors.

**LKI:** Have you done any actions on violations of women's human rights in the Arab world?

**JN:** We've done an action alert about the medicalization of female genital mutilation (FGM) in Egypt; I think that's the only case in the Arab world to date that we have addressed (see News Briefs, p. 8). In Egypt, we worked with some of the local groups to see what steps we could take that would be useful and effective. Sometimes it is very hard for us to know what would work best, so we really rely on local groups to set the pace and plan the strategy together. We would like to develop more links with other women's human rights groups throughout the Arab world.

**LKI:** When a human rights abuse affects a woman or women in a particular country, do you go to them to offer your services, or do they come to you?

**JN:** Increasingly, we are happy to say, people are coming to us. In the beginning, we were going to them. We would attend conferences and hear about cases and follow it up. For instance, the case of Maricris from the Philippines came out of the Vienna Conference on Human Rights in 1993. And at last year's Beijing conference, we learned of the case of Fauziya Kasinga, who was going to be forced to undergo FGM against her will.

**LKI:** What was your overall appraisal of the Beijing Conference?

**JN:** The distance between the official meeting site and the NGO site in Huairou presented problems. Ideally, the point of such a conference is to facilitate dialogue and sharing between governmental and non-governmental actors, but when you have a clear attempt to separate them, as we saw at Beijing, the message, at some level, is "we don't really want to hear what you NGO people have to say."

**SS:** And the Chinese Government definitely did not want to hear anything from the NGO community!

**JN:** I think that a lot of women representing NGOs at Huairou had no idea what was in the *Platform for Action*, and they weren't really focusing on it. They were having their own networking sessions, which they could have done anywhere, or even through the Internet.

**SS:** Still, I have to say that Beijing was a necessary experience; we had to be there. For Equality Now, the purpose of going was to network and discuss some of the human rights issues that were taking place around the world to decide how we could best contribute to monitoring, consciousness-raising, and protection. So, getting the Kasinga case was ironic: it was being played out in the US, but we had to go to China to learn all the details!

**JN:** Yet in terms of the official purpose of Beijing, we at Equality Now are rather skeptical about the kinds of documents coming out of the conference. We are now going back to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and even earlier documents in international law that have much more force, and treaties that have been signed which have, in a legal sense, greater weight than the *Platform for Action*. Perhaps the *Platform* develops some ideas and issues a little further, but the most basic promises to the world's women remain unfulfilled. So, what is our focus? To expand the documents when existing promises are not yet implemented? That is one of the key reasons we have taken up the UN Secretary General action (see "Quote/Unquote," p.6), because the *Platform for Action* states, in very specific terms, that all decision-making levels of the UN Secretariat should be gender-integrated. Then six months later, there is a discussion concerning the post of Secretary General, and hardly any attention at all was paid to the glaring gender gap at the top!

**SS:** There are a lot of disparities between signed documents and actual behavior. For instance, when we returned from Beijing, the whole Sara Balabagan case erupted in the United Arab Emirates. We were simply flabbergasted, because the UAE delegation had been at Beijing, and had

just signed a document containing very specific, concrete language concerning the protection of migrant workers; it's not some vague promise — it's clearly spelled out in detailed guidelines in the *Platform for Action*. It would be much better if the *Platform* were a shorter document and everybody read it and followed it.

**LKI:** I am glad that you brought up the Balabagan case, because it is clear that mass population movements, whether due to refugees fleeing war or labor migration, will be an increasingly important focus for human rights work in the next century. Migrants and refugees are often women, and they don't have any citizenship status or support networks in the host countries where they reside. These are people who "fall through the cracks" of the international legal and human rights system.

**JN:** Definitely!

**LKI:** What is Equality Now's work plan for the coming few years? Do you have a particular project you want to focus on, or are you remaining responsive to whatever violations of women's human rights come up?

**SS:** One of our upcoming campaigns will focus on trafficking in women and girls. We are currently strategizing on how best to deal with this issue, which is just so immense and complex. It is a truly international problem, but is especially severe in southeast Asia, parts of Europe and Latin America.

**JN:** We also have an action on abortion, which we are doing in Nepal, a country where abortion is forbidden under any circumstances, whether a woman is impregnated as a result of incest or rape, or whether her life is threatened by carrying the pregnancy to term. We are working with a rights group in Nepal to reform abortion laws and to allow certain exceptions for women. Nepal has an incredibly high maternal mortality rate, mostly due to women going to back-street illegal abortionists, which is terribly unsafe.

**SS:** In addition to issuing our alerts, we are working with the UN Human Rights Committee. When countries come up to report to the UNHR Committee for review, we contact NGOs in each country to let them know their government is to be assessed, and we ask them for their reports on the internal human rights situation in their country. We ask them, too, if there are any issues they would like to have raised concerning human rights practices or violations, and then we offer to assist them in any way we can. Last year, Afghanistan was coming up for review, and through NGO contacts working with Afghan refugee women in Pakistan, we learned that women in Afghanistan were being forbidden by the Taliban Islamic group to go to school or to work.

Even more shocking, we discovered that female UN officials in Afghanistan were being dismissed from their positions under pressure from the Taliban. As soon as we discovered this, we immediately got the documentation to the UN Human Rights Committee, and also sent it out to the media. Soon afterwards, we were able to meet a group of Afghan women activists here in New York, where they met with UN officials. Doors were opening to these women; people had to talk to them, and as a result, these Afghan women realized they have a power and a voice, and that the UN, as a world body, has a duty to abide by internationally recognized human rights principles.

**LKI:** The process of empowerment could be enhanced if this group of Afghan women began networking with Pakistani women, Arab women and Asian women.

**JN:** Yes, and related to this is the idea of involving more women in peace processes throughout the world. This is really needed. There are so many conflicts nowadays, *i.e.*, Bosnia, Chechenia, Somalia, Rwanda. But look at the peace efforts in Somalia, in Bosnia. Where are the women in these peace processes?! Wherever you look, it is clear that women are outside the power-structures that are deciding what constitutes peace and reconciliation in these war-torn societies.

**LKI:** The same could, unfortunately, be said about women in post-war Lebanon. What are some of the biggest challenges Equality Now faces in trying to carry out its mission?

**JN:** The big challenge is not that people don't care about women's human rights and their violation; it's that they just do not know. And once they do know, they really care a lot. But getting the word out is so hard, because of lack of communication technology in reaching women in some of these remote countries. We just do not have the money yet to do all that we know we must do to inform the world of violations of women's human rights.

**SS:** I'd say that the biggest challenge is raising money. We have been incredibly successful in garnering and generating media coverage over the last four years, but we cannot seem to translate these successes into funding. At present, we are seeking subsistence funding from foundations known for supporting mainstream human rights organizations, but when we tell them that we are focusing on women's rights, the response we frequently receive is, "well, it's a little bit specialized....I don't think that this request fits within our mandate".

**LKI:** Violations of the human rights of more than half of the world's population is too specialized?!

**SS:** Exactly! We started this organization precisely because women's human rights were not being adequately monitored and protected. Now we are discovering that, because it wasn't being done, it wasn't being funded, and so on. It's a vicious circle!

**JN:** I used to work with Amnesty International, and I tried to get them to focus on women's rights issues. In 1990, I was asked to chair a task force, and this was one of the first opportunities I had to focus on women's issues. As a result of this task force's recommendations, we did get Amnesty International to undertake a research project which resulted in the publication of a report on human rights violations against women within Amnesty International's mandate. Part of the work of the task force was to highlight those areas in which Amnesty could be more effective in safeguarding women's rights, *e.g.*, preventing rape by governmental officials and soldiers, *etc.*; and the other part was to look at the issue of rights violations from the women's movement's point of view. As a result of taking this perspective, we quickly discovered that governmental abuses are a rather small part of a wider set of problems. Most violence against women doesn't take place in prison, or at the hands of the military or the police. Rather, women's human rights are most frequently violated in the home, on the street, in the workplace, and these types of abuse were viewed as being far outside the scope of Amnesty's mandate. We felt that it would take a very long time for the organization to get around to addressing these violations effectively. But one can argue that Amnesty is now getting around to doing this. They are now focusing more on women, but I think they are constricted by their official mandate as it currently exists; they cannot get to the heart of the issues that affect the most women in the most serious ways. An issue like trafficking in women, for example, is just not part of their work. Unless a woman ends up in a prison somehow, or is tortured by the military or the police as a result of trafficking, Amnesty is not set up to help her. The issue of female genital mutilation (FGM) generated a huge debate as to whether groups like Amnesty International would get involved. They have taken steps to do educational projects against FGM, but they have stopped short of activism. You have to ask yourself: Why would they treat FGM differently from other types of human rights violations? And they would probably respond, "well, it's a cultural thing, it's not a purely political or legal matter". But in our experience of networking at the grass-roots level, it is clear that you can address such issues in a coherent, constructive way, rather than differentiate them as a class and say, "we're only going to do educational programs on this issue, but not activism." When you are the world's premiere human rights organization, this sends the message that there is a hierarchy of human rights violations. What are we saying to those voiceless little girls going under the

knife in Ghana, Togo, Egypt and Ethiopia, and sometimes dying under the knife? That they are not a priority!? That we will educate about their problem, but not advocate?

**SS:** The irony of it all is that we got a call today from Amnesty saying they are going to be doing more work on FGM, and they want to consult with us.

**JN:** Amnesty could do so much! They have the resources, both personnel and financial, to put their energy into focusing systematically on discovering which countries have actually banned the practice, and if so, are the laws in place? Are the laws being implemented? Clearly, they are not. So, if there is no legislation, they should mount a campaign to effect legislation, or to implement it in countries which have laws but choose to ignore them. Amnesty could highlight particular cases to attract public interest. So many girls have died in Egypt. Is the Egyptian Government properly investigating and prosecuting those responsible for these deaths? I don't think you would have to prosecute too many people to bring a halt to this practice, which currently goes on with complete impunity. If there is a consensus — and I believe there is — among the international human rights community that FGM is a human rights violation, then we should spare no effort to stop it before any more little girls are killed or permanently disabled. It's an outrage.

**LKI:** Of course, the counter-argument to your view would be one based on a claim of "cultural relativism". How would you respond to it?

**JN:** We forget to ask a very important question: Who owns culture? Cultures are not unchanging, monolithic entities. If you ask me, Surita, or Anita Bryant what's going on in contemporary American culture, I am sure that you would get quite a diverse set of responses! And that is true everywhere. In every cultural context, you can find women who want equality and autonomy; it's an inner, human aspiration. We have to tap into that, whether we are talking about women in New Jersey or New Guinea. Equality Now searches out those women in every country, and we work with them.

**SS:** I think that this cultural relativism argument is, ironically, rather imperialistic; it implies that other cultures just don't have as much variety or subtleties as western culture does. I don't think that this view is accurate.

**JN:** I also feel that the human rights movement has focused on a skewed portion of human rights: the civil and the political, without giving due regard to the economic side of human rights. And this deficiency plays right into the hands of the cultural relativists' argument. It is really unfortunate, because those basic economic rights are just as important,

and they really ought to be addressed. Equality Now is trying to do this, but it will take a lot of creativity to figure out how to use our strategies and techniques to address these more subtle violations, like debt burdens. They are not as immediately obvious as torture or extra-judicial killings, but they also take their toll. If we look at trafficking, we are forced to ask why women end up leaving their home country for another. Do they really want to leave, or are they compelled to do so by economic pressures? Are there any viable economic options for them and their families back in Sri Lanka, Romania, the Philippines, or Guatemala? If we focus on these economic exigencies, and view them in a more holistic way — not just as economic indicators — maybe it will decrease the tendency to see all human rights violations as strictly political or cultural phenomena.

**LKI:** What is the biggest obstacle you face?

**JN:** I don't like the word "obstacle"! I prefer "challenge" instead. One of our greatest challenges is to bring the type of exacting research and documentation done by conventional human rights organizations into the area of women's rights. There has been a lot written, much of it anecdotal information, but not enough hard documentation. We find it a challenge — as well as an educational experience — to work with some of these groups on attaining the level of precision of documentation that we need to move forward. We have to maintain a certain standard of credibility. It's a transformation we are working to realize at the grass-roots level. What Amnesty International has done that has been very helpful has been to promote the idea that violations are phenomena that happen; you can document them. Violations are facts having an objective existence in the physical world. Thus, we at Equality Now tend to steer away from the more ideological discussions about women's rights. It's not as if we don't find these discussions important — they are — it's just that they are not immediately relevant to our work. Ideology too often takes precedence in discussions of women's human rights; sometimes, there is not enough careful attention to detail, not enough actual, on-the-ground reporting of facts. So, we are hoping to increase the amount of facts available for analysis and advocacy; we need to be more precise if we are to successfully pursue cases. We also need a network of detail-oriented people throughout the world to gather such facts. Hence, we usually gravitate to journalists and lawyers, who instinctively make detailed reports of the actual facts of a case; they have been trained to do this.

**LKI:** What have been your greatest rewards?

**SS:** The Afghan women's network was really rewarding for us. Also, there was a case a few years ago of a young Saudi Arabian woman, Nada, who sought political asylum in

Canada because of politically and socially sanctioned mistreatment by her family in Saudi Arabia. Equality Now was still a very small organization at that time, in fact, this action was only our second one.

**JN:** We were astounded at how sexist the Canadian judge had been in denying Nada political asylum; he actually said that her problems were not serious, and suggested that she simply needed to show more respect for her father. Nada was in hiding when we got involved in the case. We began by adding a layer of international attention and support to the work that was being done on her behalf by various Canadian human rights organizations, all of which were much larger and stronger than Equality Now. Our very first action had been on a case concerning women in Poland, and as an afterthought, we sent the action alert about Nada's case to our colleagues in Poland, who immediately alerted their networks to write letters of protest to the Canadian Government concerning the refusal of asylum for Nada. The Canadian Government was really disturbed to receive so many letters from all corners of the world, even from countries Canada was helping with social development projects, asking the Canadians to show more respect for women's rights! Later, when the Canadian Prime Minister made a speech announcing that the Government was reversing its decision and granting asylum to Nada, he said that he had made the decision, in part, because of his concern for the international reputation of Canada. Afterwards, Canada adopted guidelines for women refugees seeking asylum, and these guidelines were later adopted by the United States Government. This case is quite memorable; it was so rewarding because such a small effort really paid off in such a big way. It's experiences like this that keep us going, despite financial constraints. But there is still so much to do!

*If you would like to learn more about Equality Now, or assist them in their work, you can contact them at the following address: Equality Now, P.O. Box 20646, Columbus Circle Station, New York, New York 10023, USA. E-mail address: sandosham@igc.apc.org.*

*Lebanese readers should note that the UN Commission on Human Rights will soon be reviewing Lebanon's human rights situation. If you wish to emphasize a particular point concerning women's human rights in Lebanon, please contact Equality Now and they will include your concern in their report to the Committee.*