

## SALMA KHAN: THE FIRST ASIAN WOMAN TO CHAIR THE CEDAW COMMITTEE

By Myriam Sfeir, Assistant Editor

I met Dr. Salma Khan, Chairperson of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and President of the CEDAW Forum, around mid October. She was invited by UNICEF and the Lebanese University to attend a workshop, held in Beirut, whose aim was the incorporation of the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) into the curriculum of Law Schools.

Khan is greatly concerned about the status of women in her country, Bangladesh, and improving women's status all around the world.

She has worked extensively on mainstreaming women in economic development, especially in Bangladesh where women's economic participation and contribution is not recognized. Through her interest in international human rights instruments she came to know about CEDAW and started working on it. Her aim was to make women aware of this convention which would empower them at the international level and enable them to claim and gain their fundamental rights. This year she was elected Chairperson of the CEDAW Committee and is the first Asian to hold such a position.

**Myriam Sfeir:** What was your childhood like? Did you face any discrimination within the family? How understanding are your husband and children?

**Salma Khan:** My father died when I was one year old, so I was brought up by my mother along with my 6 brothers and sisters. My mother was an exceptionally enlightened woman. Although she never received any formal university education she was very cultured, for her family enjoyed a very strong educational background. She had a strong impact on my upbringing and was the instrument that enabled me to grow and become the person I am



My mother was an exceptionally enlightened woman

today. I was raised in a very liberal atmosphere; my childhood was free and open considering the traditional atmosphere prevalent in the country. My mother valued education and wanted all her children to acquire a degree. She faced a lot of objection from my uncles and the extended family who complained about her giving her daughters the same educational opportunities as her sons.

Since early childhood I was taught to value justice, equality, and freedom. I was raised to believe that I was equal to my brothers and I had the same rights and privileges they enjoyed. My mother urged us to fight against injustice and that was a unique thing. My husband and children are very understanding and supportive. I know that I have been very fortunate

for I was raised in a very liberal family and have a husband who gives me space and allows me to grow.

**MS:** Did you face any discrimination in the workplace?

**SK:** Personally, I never encountered any discrimination partly because of my bearing and personality. I have always been very outspoken in the sense that I never hesitated to speak out and condemn any kind of injustice. At first I faced a lot of opposition, but later on people started appreciating my courage. I always made my point without being rude. However, that does not mean that I was really

given equal opportunities to that of my male colleagues. In the public sphere I always had an opportunity to speak out. Men could not exclude me from any discussion because I refused to mute my voice. I always made my presence felt and this is partly the reason why I have not been dominated by male patriarchy. Had I not pushed my way through I would never have been noticed. I made it on my own and I am proud of that.

I always encourage women to be forceful and aggressive for if women do not pave their own way and strive to make it on their own, neither society nor men will give them any opportunities. In my culture, women

Men could not exclude me from any discussion because I refused to mute my voice

are complacent and accept their lot. Women do not speak out unless they are asked to. I always urge women to speak out for I believe we have a role to play. We should not hesitate for everyone ought to know our opinions.

**MS:** How active are the women NGO movements in Bangladesh?

**SK:** We have a very vibrant and strong NGO movement in Bangladesh. Generally speaking young women, in their early thirties, educated and belonging

to the middle class, are very conscious of the problems afflicting them. They are very articulate and deeply involved in women's issues. Women insist on making their presence felt and their opinions heard and known. They are convinced that unless they voice their demands things will be enforced on them. Yet, like most societies women from upper class families do not participate. Being members of the privileged class they are under the illusion that they have everything and fail to recognize their inferiority. They are more westernized with priorities different than ours; however, they are a very small minority.

Women in Bangladesh are very vocal, assertive and aggressive concerning their rights and privileges because they know that if they do not fight for their rights no one will. Whenever they are discriminated against, they organize demonstrations, distribute flyers, organize press conferences in order to attract attention. For instance, last March on the occasion of the International Women's Day, women - mostly single - spoke openly about their reproductive rights. Although the women knew that such an action would shock people, for this is a very sensitive subject in our part of the world, they went on with it because their priority is to make their voices heard.

**MS:** How do you define your feminism? Do you believe there is a difference between Western and non Western feminism?

**SK:** My feminism lies in my awareness of the oppressions and exploitation women suffer in society, at work, and within the family, and in conscious action on my part to change these conditions. My mission is to empower myself as well as other women. My responsibilities entail trying to mold the norms, traditions, and customs encumbering women and striving to wipe out discrimination by eliminating and changing discriminatory laws.

I personally do not like to draw a sharp line between Western and non Western feminism. Feminism is basically about equal rights and opportunities. It demands

recognizing women as human beings whose rights must be observed and respected. The differences stem from culture. Given that Western cultures value individualism and non Western ones favor interdependence, their women differ on the surface yet their problems and demands are the same. It is false to claim that, Western women have different requirements, the only difference is that, unlike us, Westerners have come out of the closet.

**MS:** What are the responsibilities of the CEDAW Committee?

**SK:** As chairperson of the CEDAW committee I am responsible for steering the committee which consists of 23 persons. Our mandate is to oversee the full implementation of the CEDAW convention and to monitor its implementation at its various stages in different countries. Yet, our role goes beyond monitoring. We educate women and inform them of their rights and responsibilities under CEDAW as well as under all human rights instruments. Another major responsibility is to exert pressure on the states parties to fulfill their obligations. Given that governments are keen to project a positive image on the international scene and want to be accepted as progressive countries rather than violators of women and children's rights, they are more compelled to take up their international responsibilities when pressured. Yet, we try to keep the door for negotiations open. The CEDAW committee also tries to establish contact and dialogue with states parties and intervenes when human rights violations take place. Such endeavors have proven to help women tremendously.

We also instruct UN bodies on what they should do and specify to them their roles and responsibilities especially UN specialized agencies UNIFEM, UNICEF, and WHO. Because women's rights is an all encompassing issue which touches upon all aspects and spheres, all UN agencies have a responsibility to fulfill. We continuously monitor their progress in case they fail to fulfill all their obligation. These agencies are accountable to us. Another task is to identify the gaps within the convention, coming up with recommendations and engaging in other analytical endeavours.

We are hoping to ratify our optional protocol in two years time. Through the optional protocol, individual complaints will be entertained by the committee whereby any individual whose rights have been violated can approach the CEDAW committee. This decree when ratified will enhance the work of the Committee rendering it more effective and more powerful.

My mission is to empower myself as well as other women