



## 2009 WISE Conference “Change through Communication”

### **The Yemen Times Early Marriage Campaign: the Story of Nujood**

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#### **Background**

The issue of early marriage is a controversial one in Yemen. Mainly because it is a male dominated society and many Yemeni men do not want to be told that marrying someone below 18 is a crime. The law does not prevent child marriage; the age is left to the parents or guardians.

Therefore, although early marriage was prevalent in Yemen, the Yemeni media except for a few attempts triggered by either conscious journalists or events organized by international and national organizations working in the field. A 2006 field study revealed that child marriage among girls reached 52.1%, compared to 6.7% among males. This means that one in two Yemeni women get married before 18 years old, average age for this half is 15.

The first time we heard about Nujood was from her lawyer who is a friend of Yemen Times. Shada Naser called us saying that there is a nine years old girl [we thought she was eight at the time] in the court who had run away from home to the court house seeking divorce from her 33 years old husband whom her father forced her to marry.

She had been with her husband for two months, where she played the role of a wife in all senses of the word. Her environment was/ is more than poor. She lives with her 12 siblings in a shabby house and sleeps with two of her sisters in the kitchen. She had no education, and before marriage spent her day time begging in the streets.

#### **Strategies for Change**

When Yemen Times received Nujood's case, we decided this would be a turning point for the issue of early marriage in Yemen and that we as English media will raise issue locally and internationally until something gets done. Hence Nujood was our front page story for several weeks. We conducted interviews, researched other case studies and gathered background information, all the while keeping Nujood as a symbol of our war against early marriage in Yemen.

Since the story of Nujood we campaigned for a law against child marriages strongly. Every month there was a report on early marriage or one of its aspects. It usually held front page or the features page with photographs and illustrations. We have taken up the issue from a legal, social, medical, humane, cultural and even economical point of view. We lobbying youth, women, local and international organizations, religious leaders and most importantly decision makers and parliamentarians. We did this through interviews, news stories and events which we hosted at Yemen Times. If you search the key words early marriage in Yemen Times website, you will come across more than a hundred articles and more are to come.

We were attacked by local media and some social figures that we are showing our dirty laundry to the world. Yet we persisted and we had to do something more than publishing about Nujood's story and lobbying international media to put pressure on the Yemeni parliament. We had to make the story of Nujood and the other victims real for people. So we created an event, a celebration for the girls and we invited everyone who might be related to this issue even remotely.

The event was a success, more than two hundred people attended, the hall was overflowing with people and we raised the issue and campaigned with the parliamentarians.

People left the hall in shock as they saw the little three girls walking in front of them and sitting awkwardly staring at the cake and toys that many of the guests brought. I heard many women and especially men saying: "that could have been my daughter or sister." Finally we made the issue of early marriage an issue of real life and not just a number of a title in the newspaper.

### **Challenges and Successes**

Some Yemeni media did the opposite of Yemen Times had done and endorsed the issue of early marriage through either religious statements confirming the Prophets marriage to Aiyasah while she was nine and wedded her when she was 12, or through cultural norms that displayed a teenage woman as the best catch for any man as she would be a virgin and not know much about life so the man could dominate her.

The dominant saying is that young woman are like clay, you can form them they way you want. This is why it is the men who oppose any law against marrying girls below 18.

In February 2009, after a little less than one year of campaigning against early marriage in Yemen, members of the parliament have finally approved setting the minimum age for marriage for both boys and girls at 17 years old.

In less than a week this law was debated again in the parliament and a petition was signed by 23 "religiously oriented" MPs to cancel it, legally it is still valid. However, an implementing mechanism for it is yet to be devised by the parliament itself and concerned authority.

And we are still on the case until today.