VNC Strategic Consultation Meeting

“Taking Stock of Our Gains and Challenges for the Future”

Twenty four (24) VNC partners, activists and allies gathered in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia on 5-8 May 2011 to review the first three (3) years of the Campaign and to map out its future. The meeting is the culmination of an evaluation of the Campaign and its activities under the MDG3 Fund: Investing in Equality of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The evaluation examined the Campaign’s development through the work of its local partners and global communication team, its outcomes and impacts, and also opportunities and future challenges.

For three (3) days, we took a closer look at how the Campaign has evolved since its launch, by reflecting on the following questions:

1. What have we learned from the three (3) years of the VNC Campaign’s existence: what are our strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats/ constraints?

2. What can we learn from others?

3. Where else and how can the Campaign make a difference in the next four (4) years?

Lessons learnt from the three (3) years of the Campaign

The Campaign builds upon a diverse network of individuals and organizations whose work was boosted for greater impact by a grant from the MDG3 Fund in 2008. The campaign evaluation confirmed that VNC’s unique and added value lies in its exposé of gender-based discrimination and violence against women (VAW) through the lenses of culture, traditions and religion; its spotlighting of the struggles actions of women and their communities at the forefront of challenging the use of cultural discourses to justify injustices; its use of ICT and social networking tools to reach a broad range of audiences, and to increase public knowledge on the nexus between ‘culture’ and VAW within a human rights framework.

For the past three years, the VNC campaign team and partners have initiated at least five (5) transnational projects and over ten (10) localized campaigns which centred around a common goal of combatting ‘culturally-justified’ violence against women (CVAW) and
strategizing for long-term women’s empowerment in ways that will effectively counter the use of ‘culture’ by disempowering forces to legitimize the denial of women’s human rights. Partners served in different ways as a liaison or link between women in their communities and policymakers in public spaces, and the global campaign added a link between these initiatives and the broader public spaces of the internet, mass media and the international human rights arena.

Partners who presented their projects during the meeting were: Solidaritas Perempuan and Koalisi NGO HAM–Aceh from Indonesia; Shirkat Gah and Baidarie Sialkot from Pakistan; BAOBAB for Women’s Human Rights in Nigeria; Salmmah Women’s Resource Centre in Sudan; GREFELS from Senegal; the Institute for Women’s Empowerment-Iran and the Equal Despite Difference on Iran.

The outputs and outcomes of projects led by partners and the campaign team were proven to be numerous, impressive and inspiring, and widely referred to in partners’ reports and interviews by the campaign evaluator as innovative contributions to local and global discussions about women’s rights, cultural rights, and cultural relativism.

In terms of substance, partner’s presentations showed the diversity, both in context and subject matter, of initiatives undertaken. In each context, VAW was defined and understood in terms of lived experiences and realities of women and communities affected, with definitions ranging from the more classical, such as physical violence to broader definitions such as sexual harassment in public, private and cyberspace, discrimination against religious minorities, denial of the right to education and much more.

VNC research and advocacy also highlights the intersectionality between the perpetuation of CVAW with other social factors. For example, work by partners to combat CVAW - such as ‘honour’ crimes, stoning, FGM, early/forced marriage - highlights links between the (denial of) rights of women and girls, persons living with disabilities, religious minorities such as the Ahmadiyya community, and sexual minorities, with social phenomena such as the rural-urban divide, access to economic resources and the labour market, and civil and political participation. Partners working in their own different contexts are now able to adopt new lenses and discourses of culture and tradition in their work on VAW and gender-based discrimination to better combat CVAW in its diverse manifestations.

Most of the work by the VNC Campaign and its partners to deepen the analysis of CVAW concurrently addresses change at the individual and community levels, while also calling for structural and formal change. For example, the focus of some groups on combatting misogynistic and culturally-relativist aspects of specific policies brought about a sharing of the public domain with other groups that simultaneously addressed women’s ability to reclaim cultural spaces, as well as to address violations of women’s rights from within varying
cultural discourses (feminism, human rights, religion, etc). Through creative actions such as documentary film making, grassroots workshops, community radio campaigns, national lobbying, dialogues with policy makers and religious gatekeepers, petitioning officials, online networking and campaigning through the UN human rights arena, VNC activities have provided fertile ground for cross-context solidarity.

However, given the short timeframe of the MDG3 funded project, one could not expect impact to yet be felt in some areas of VNC work, such as in legal reforms or long term policy change. On the other hand, policy change alone will rarely be enough to ensure real change on the ground which thus pushes campaigns like VNC towards working in a more holistic and interactive manner. As expressed by one advisor to the Campaign,

“the work itself of pushing for policy (or other change) is itself constitutive of citizenship- and rights-construction – so whilst policy change alone is not enough, the work of policy change can shift its own goal posts in the process as well as making the rights construction a substantive quotidian construction.”

This analysis was confirmed by one project partner who reflected on her organization’s empowerment work with women at the community level. She noted that while individual women had more awareness of their rights and ways to identify and challenge VAW, the opportunities for larger cultural change fluctuate and are affected by multiple variables:

“Based on women’s experience, we know that the patriarchal perspective and cultural values are not easy to navigate. Now women have information that ‘VAW is not part of our culture or religious values’, they have solidarity, and a sharing space to talk about VAW, which before was too taboo to even be discussed.

In practice, women now have more bargaining positions in their family and with their husbands, which in our village sharing sessions they said had also been an obstacle previously. Yet while more women and men reject VAW, at the same time, so many factors and actors disempower them [such as passing discriminatory legislation without consultation, lack of law enforcement, poverty, illiteracy]. And they told us that sometimes the use of harmful practices goes up and down, which means it is not linear.”

What lies ahead for the Campaign: Strengthening our Alliances, Knowledge Base and Impacts.

We chose to hold the meeting in Malaysia because of the presence of a number of highly respected and enduring women’s organizations in the country. The following NGOs were invited to share their work and offer us their insights and advice on the future directions of the Campaign. Likewise, their presence gave us the unique opportunity to share the work of the Campaign and explore areas for collaboration based on a shared agenda of addressing issues arising from the nexus between culture, women’s rights and discrimination.

1. Women’s Aid Organization (WAO)
2. International Women’s Rights Action Watch – Asia Pacific (IWRAW-AP)
3. Sisters in Islam (Malaysia)
4. Alliance for Progressive Communications-Women’s Networking Support Programme (APC-WNSP)
5. Musawah: A Global Movement for Equality and Justice in the Muslim Family
Their contributions on the application of the rights-based framework to combat CVAW, advocacy through creative and strategic communication, the use of progressive interpretations of religious texts and outreach to progressive religious leaders, and on online activism were invaluable in shaping the strategic directions of the VNC Campaign.

While tackling key challenges such as a volatile political climate, resource-mobilization, strengthening internal structures, and alliance building in the coming period, VNC's next phase will also strive for more precise, timely, and impact-driven goals. To help support and sustain VNC activists, we seek to build our knowledge base by expanding our presence at the meso-, national, regional and international levels, and also create unique indicators that can monitor, capture and assess the impact of our diverse strategies.

The meeting concluded with recommendations on the five (5) strategic areas which the Campaign would focus on in the next four (4) years which are:

1. To further contribute to the critical understanding and analyses of the “VAW” and “culture” nexus through research on how women in different cultural contexts view ‘violence’, how violence is learnt and reproduced in a variety of ‘cultural’ contexts, and how ‘culture’ of violence could be changed.

2. To contribute to the evolution of a vision towards a just, rights-based and violence-free culture by mainstreaming its human rights framework at addressing CVAW at the meso-, national, regional and international levels.

3. To further increase the visibility and effectiveness of the VNC campaign by expanding its alliances with diverse actors in Muslim contexts (Muslim majority countries and communities and Muslims as minorities and in diaspora).

4. To reach out to new constituencies especially the youth through new and creative ways of mobilization.

5. To become a major contributor towards a greater coverage and critical analysis of CVAW at mainstream national, regional and international media; and to build a pool of allies, supporters and advocates amongst the mainstream, alternative, social and cultural media practitioners.

A fuller report of the VNC Campaign Evaluation and partners’ activities will be made available soon for the public. For questions, comments of further information, please write to info@violenceisnotourculture.org.