

Catholic women's group forms in Pakistan

LAHORE, Pakistan – Posters pasted on billboards and trees by the country's main Muslim political alliance blare the "Quran-prescribed" punishments of 100 lashes or death by stoning for women who have sex outside of marriage.

As a new bill liberalizing strict women's laws makes its way through Parliament, hard-line groups have been fighting to keep a status quo they claim has divine sanction.

The same day the new bill went before the National Assembly Feb. 13, the first national Catholic women's organization was launched in Lahore, reported UCA News, an Asian church news agency.

The Catholic Women Organization "will focus mainly on awareness of gender balance and domestic violence and prescribe prevention and remedies to human-rights abuses," Sunita Fredrick, the organization's national coordinator, told UCA News.

Pakistan has other organizations of Catholic women, and Lahore Archdiocese has a women's department.

The formation of the group was announced at the conclusion of a seminar by the Pakistani bishops' commission for justice and peace Feb. 9-13. The speakers, who included human-rights activists as well as four priests and a nun, urged Catholic women to equip themselves with knowledge of laws and human rights.

"The struggle on Pakistan's streets and in the corridors of power is about changing the mindset of men, in which women are often treated as possessions and second-class citizens," said Gloria Canama, a Columban lay missionary and diocesan coordinator of the organization.

The women's rights bill, the Prevention of Anti-Women Practices Bill 2006, seeks to outlaw forced marriage and practices that prevent women from inheriting property.

It prohibits exchanges of brides between clans and child marriages for settling clan disputes and would eliminate current provisions that allow a man to divorce his wife by saying "I divorce you" three times.

Sidra Humayoon, a representative of the nongovernmental organization War on Rape, said during the seminar that rape cases in many parts of Pakistan are still filed under the Hudood Ordinance, which implements the criminal code in Shariah, or Islamic law.

The Hudood Ordinance requires a woman alleging rape to produce four male witnesses to corroborate her account, or she is charged with a false accusation of rape. Any evidence of sexual relations such as pregnancy leaves her liable to additional prosecution for having sex outside marriage.

The new women's bill would forbid police from arresting people on accusations of extramarital sex. Suspects still can be charged and tried in civil courts, but cannot be detained.

"Honor killings" of women doubled from 287 in 2005 to 565 in 2006, according to the nongovernmental Human Rights Commission of Pakistan. Almost 500 of the killings reportedly involved family members killing a woman who chose her own husband against parents' wishes or who was accused of illicit sexual relations.

Sixty of the victims were minors, and arrests linked to the killings were made in only 128 cases, the nongovernmental organization said.