

Ujale: kī ore: Muslim Women's Initiative



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The Muslim Women's Initiative (MWI) emerged in response to needs voiced by women and stakeholders from the Muslim community about a widespread lack of legal rights knowledge among Muslim women. It was recognized that though women from all religious backgrounds in India struggle with entrenched patriarchy, poverty, illiteracy and poor health, Muslim women face the additional burden of not being able to enjoy the rights guaranteed to them in the Holy Qur'an.

MWI aims to address this knowledge gap of Muslim women by providing information about their rights under the Holy Qur'an and Indian Law, supporting them in accessing these rights and removing misconceptions about women's status within Islam. MWI also seeks to create better understanding among men and boys, and religious leaders in the Muslim community about women's rights.

MWI began in May 2004 in two states - Karnataka (Bangalore, Bijapur, Dharwad and Mysore districts) and Rajasthan (Ajmer, Bhilwara, Jaipur, Jodhpur and Tonk districts) through grassroots organizations.

At the core of this initiative is a community-level structure, the women's group. A unique multi-level implementing strategy surrounds and supports this core group:

- Informational programmes (camps) for women, girls, men and boys to increase awareness about Muslim women's rights in the Holy Qur'an and the Indian Constitution
- Counseling services and legal aid to women
- Capacity building programs for women's groups
- Income generation programs for women
- Classes on women's rights in Muslim schools
- Orientation programmes for mid-level religious scholars and madrasa (centers of religious learning) students
- Forming support groups consisting of community leaders, academicians, lawyers and activists
- Developing linkages between women's groups, support groups, and service delivery mechanisms ensuring sustainability of the programme.

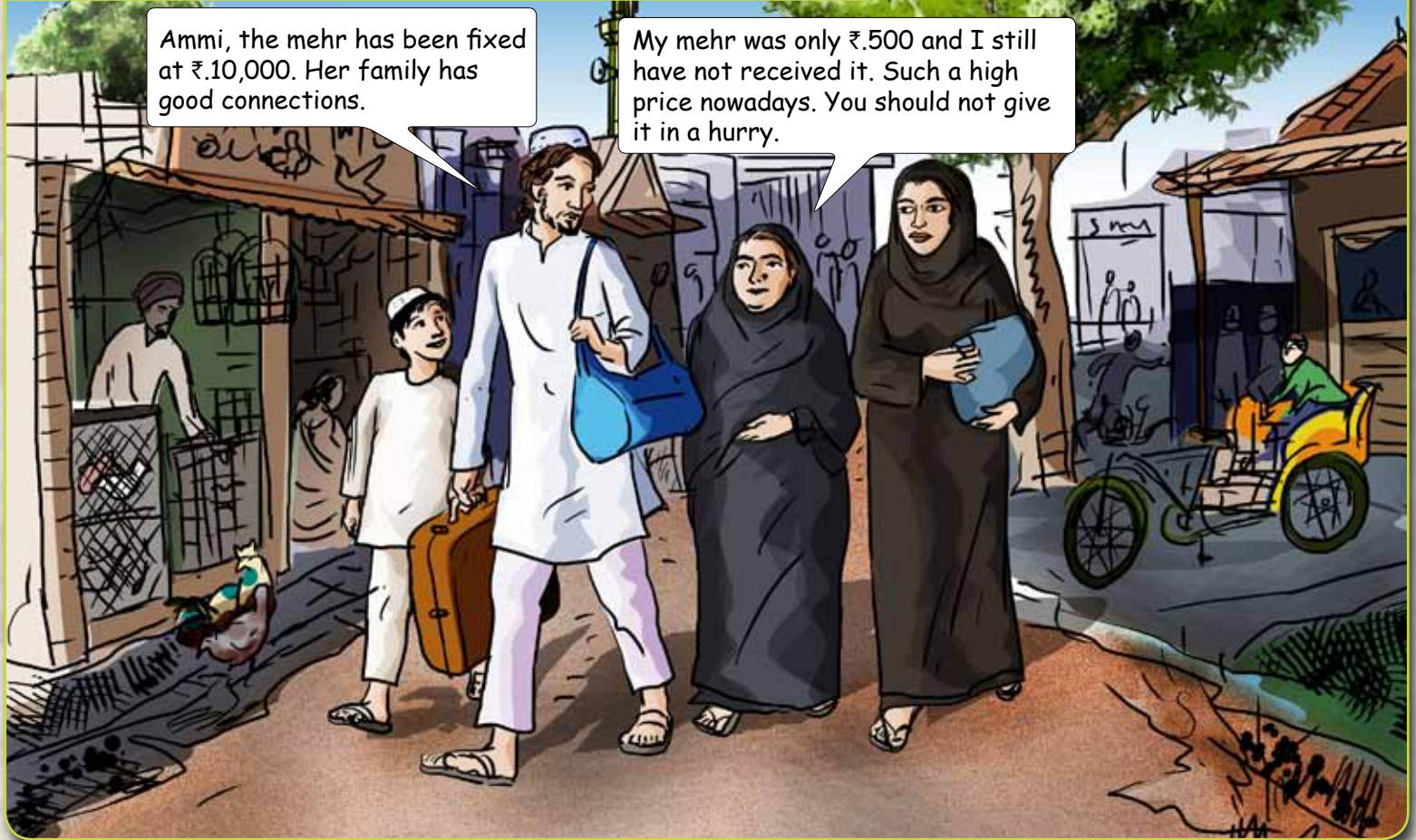
Over 5000 women are members of 400 groups formed in Karnataka and Rajasthan to promote, advocate and support economic, social and political rights for Muslim women as equal citizens of the world's largest democracy.

MWI has been implemented as part of a larger Women's Legal Rights Initiative supported by IFES/USAID in India. For more information, please contact info.communication@ifes.org.

Javed and Arshi have recently got married. Arshi has come to live with her husband's family in Ajmer.

Ammi, the mehr has been fixed at ₹.10,000. Her family has good connections.

My mehr was only ₹.500 and I still have not received it. Such a high price nowadays. You should not give it in a hurry.



But soon abuse sets in.

Always listening to the radio. She doesn't even look after my son.

You are a lazy, good-for-nothing woman.

He scolds me everyday. Sometimes he even beats me. What a miserable life. It is my bad luck to be stuck with this man.



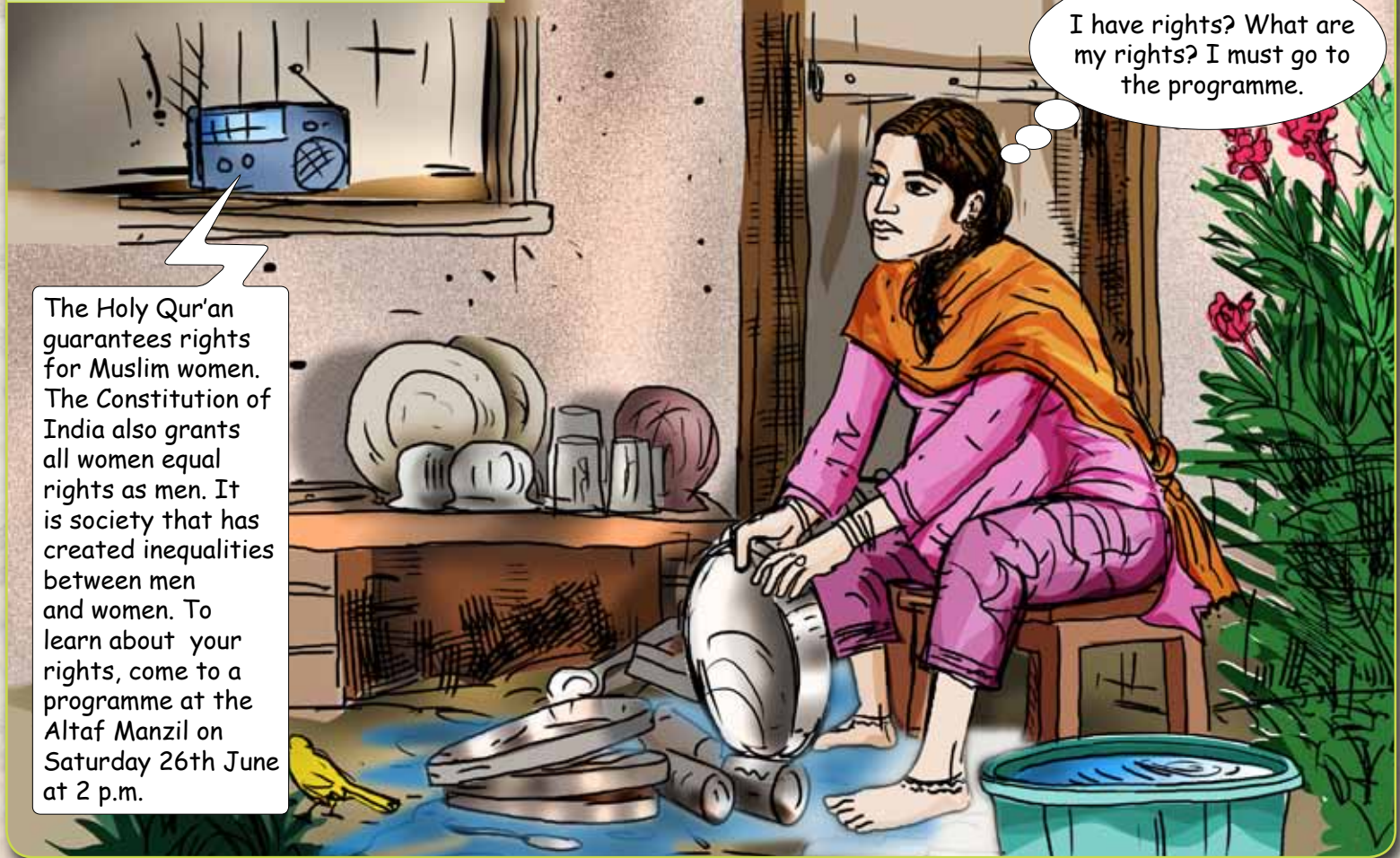
Six months later, Arshi is pregnant, but she does not feel well. She is always tired.

Why are you tired? All you do is talk to neighbours. Look at this medicine bill. You are a drain on my finances.

If I could earn, I would buy medicines myself. Doctor says that the medicines are for the good health of my baby. Only if I am in good health, can I deliver a healthy baby.



Arshi likes to listen to the radio...



The Holy Qur'an guarantees rights for Muslim women. The Constitution of India also grants all women equal rights as men. It is society that has created inequalities between men and women. To learn about your rights, come to a programme at the Altaf Manzil on Saturday 26th June at 2 p.m.

Arshi attends the programme where she sees her neighbour Fatima.



I like the title 'Ujale ki Ore'. It means 'towards light'. This film is very informative. There is so much we need to know.

The film uses puppets to tell a story about women like us. It's a true story.

Rights of Women in the Holy Qur'an:

- Right to Live
- Right to Live with Dignity
- Right to Equality
- Right to Education
- Right to Earn
- Right to Inheritance and to Own Property
- Right to Have a Say in Marriage
- Right to Mehr
- Right to Humane Treatment
- Right to Maintenance
- Right to Khula (separation from the husband)
- Right to Re-Marriage
- Right to Vote and be Nominated for Political Office

Rights of Women in the Indian Constitution:

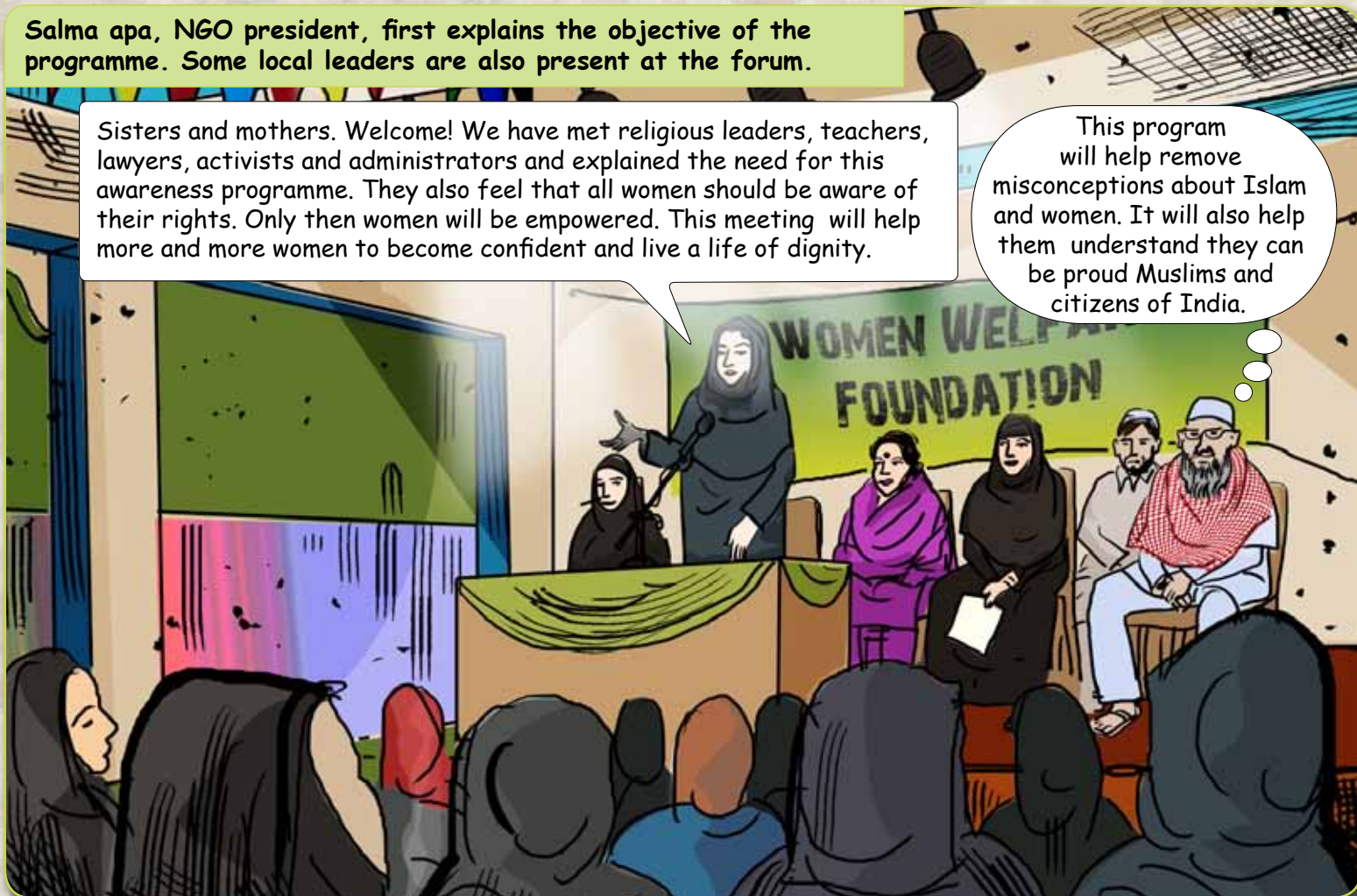
- Right to Equality
- Right to Freedom
- Right to Education
- Right to Earn
- Right against Exploitation
- Right to Freedom of Religion
- Right to Approach Court if any Constitutional Right is Violated



Salma apa, NGO president, first explains the objective of the programme. Some local leaders are also present at the forum.

Sisters and mothers. Welcome! We have met religious leaders, teachers, lawyers, activists and administrators and explained the need for this awareness programme. They also feel that all women should be aware of their rights. Only then women will be empowered. This meeting will help more and more women to become confident and live a life of dignity.

This program will help remove misconceptions about Islam and women. It will also help them understand they can be proud Muslims and citizens of India.



The Maulana endorses all that Salma apa said earlier.

This is a very important programme of Women Welfare Foundation that Salma apa has organised. All women should know and exercise their rights which have been granted both by the Holy Qur'an and the Constitution of India. Men and youth should also be made aware of women's rights so that they become our allies. We look forward to the day when the rights of Muslim women will be respected and protected by the men and youth in the community as well.



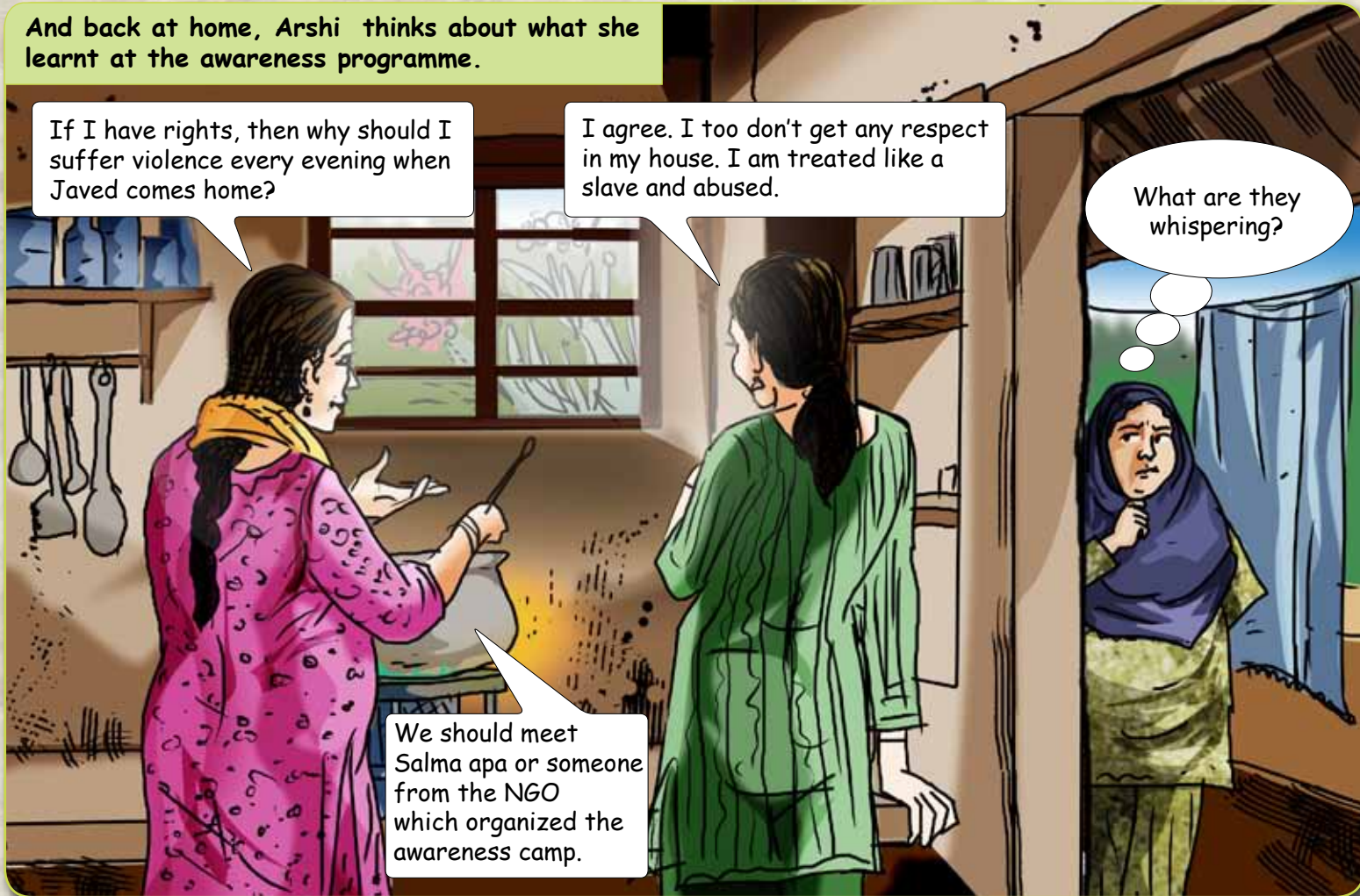
And back at home, Arshi thinks about what she learnt at the awareness programme.

If I have rights, then why should I suffer violence every evening when Javed comes home?

I agree. I too don't get any respect in my house. I am treated like a slave and abused.

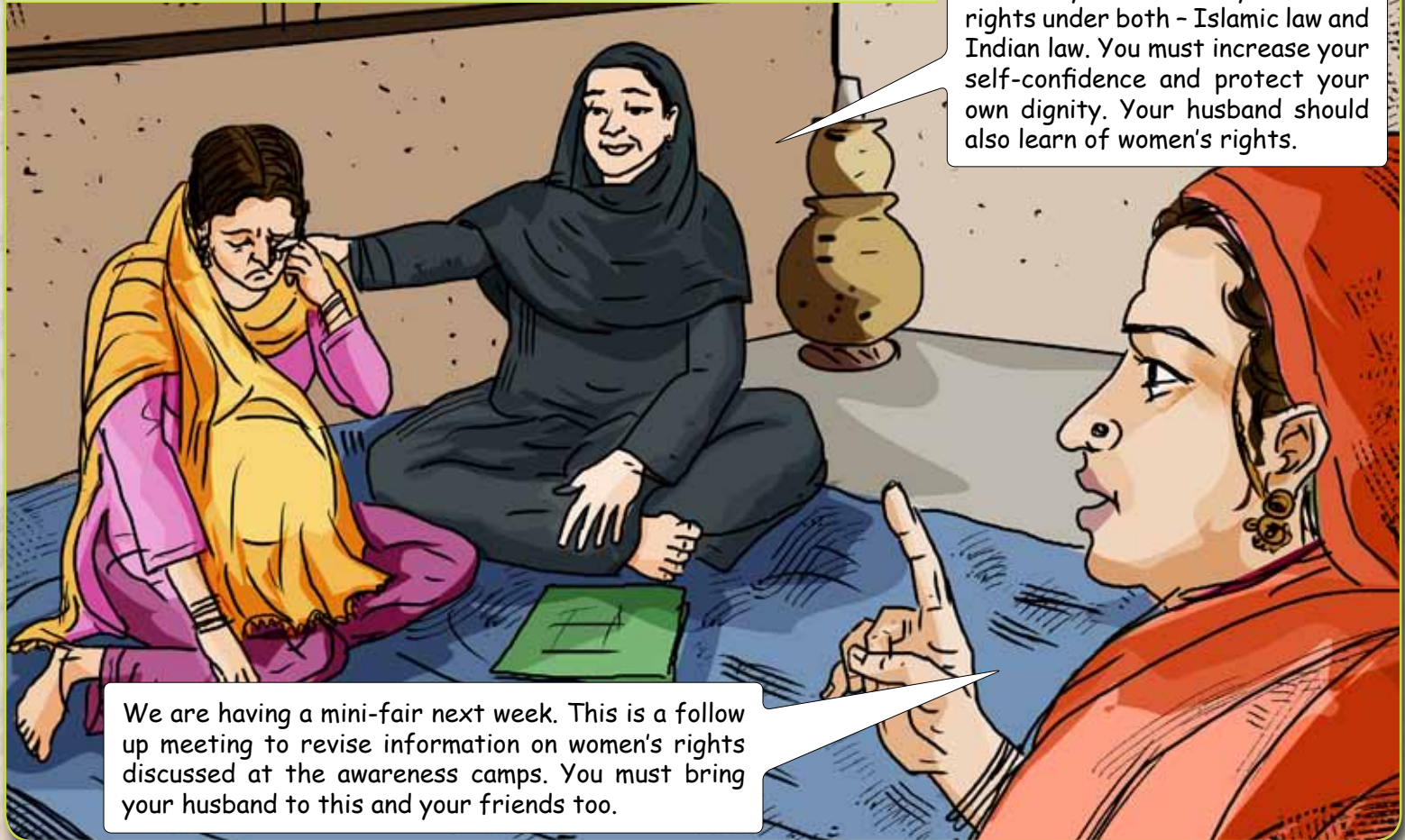
We should meet Salma apa or someone from the NGO which organized the awareness camp.

What are they whispering?



Arshi goes to meet Salma apa at Women Welfare Foundation office. She begins to cry as she explains her life at home.

You have cried too much. From now onwards you will not cry. You have rights under both - Islamic law and Indian law. You must increase your self-confidence and protect your own dignity. Your husband should also learn of women's rights.



We are having a mini-fair next week. This is a follow up meeting to revise information on women's rights discussed at the awareness camps. You must bring your husband to this and your friends too.

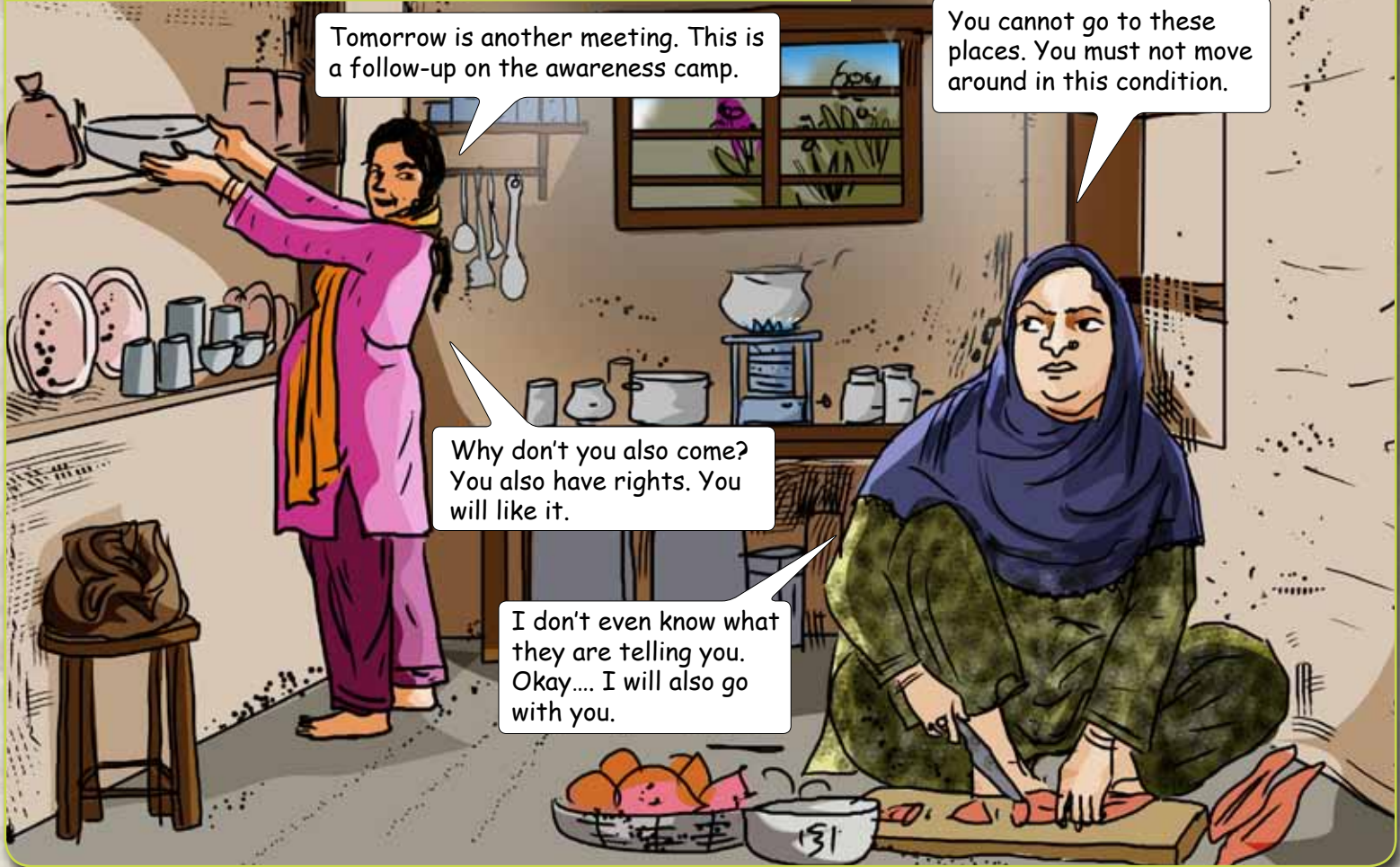
Arshi decided to talk to her mother-in-law about the meeting.

Tomorrow is another meeting. This is a follow-up on the awareness camp.

You cannot go to these places. You must not move around in this condition.

Why don't you also come? You also have rights. You will like it.

I don't even know what they are telling you. Okay... I will also go with you.



After the mini-fair, Arshi calls all the women from her colony together.

At the mini-fair, they said other women have formed groups. We should also form a group to help each other.

Some places have a counseling centre.

I heard that there is a legal aid centre to deal with violation of rights.

A course on women's rights is also being taught in schools, they said.

Let us meet Salma apa again.

One group has arranged for small loans to start a business.

The women reach the office.

We have programmes for leadership skills. We will take you for exposure visits to banks, police stations, courts - so that all of you know about these places.

This is very good. I wish Arshi could have come today.



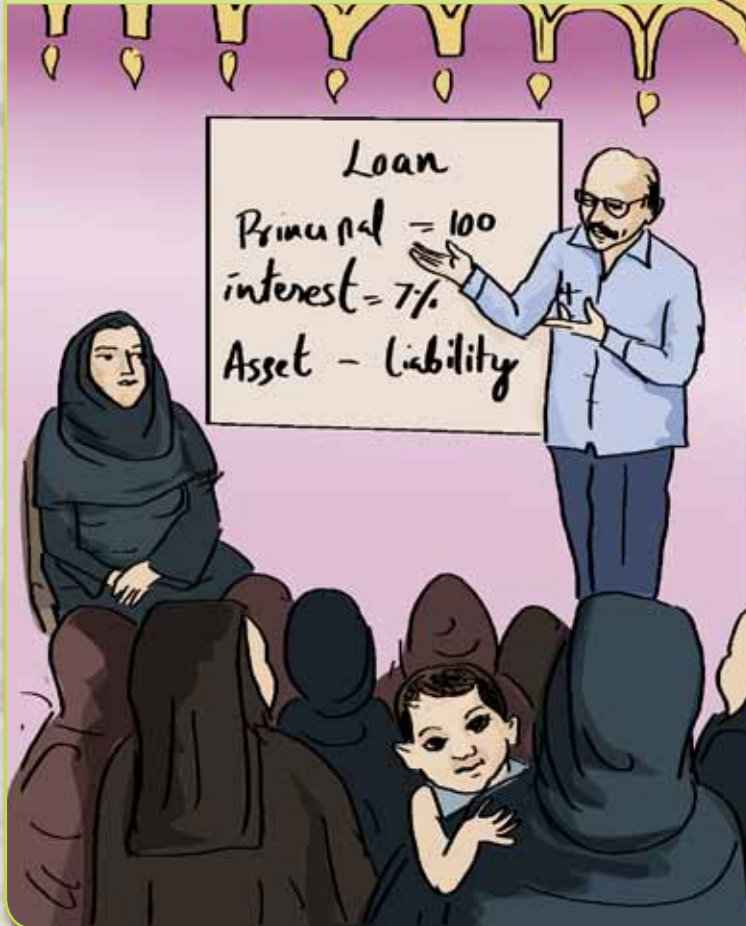
But Arshi has a problem at home.

Meetings, meetings, always meetings. What are they telling you in these meetings?

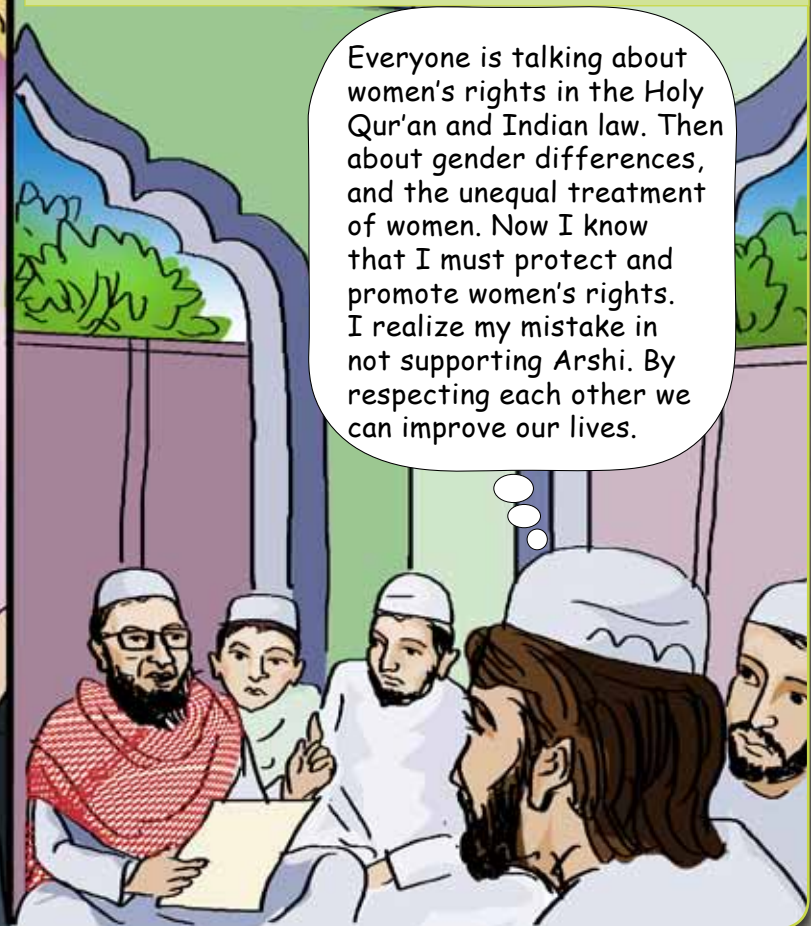
Don't worry...they are telling us nothing wrong. Your mother also came to a meeting. The elders are also there as well. You should also come next time. Men need to know about women's rights too.

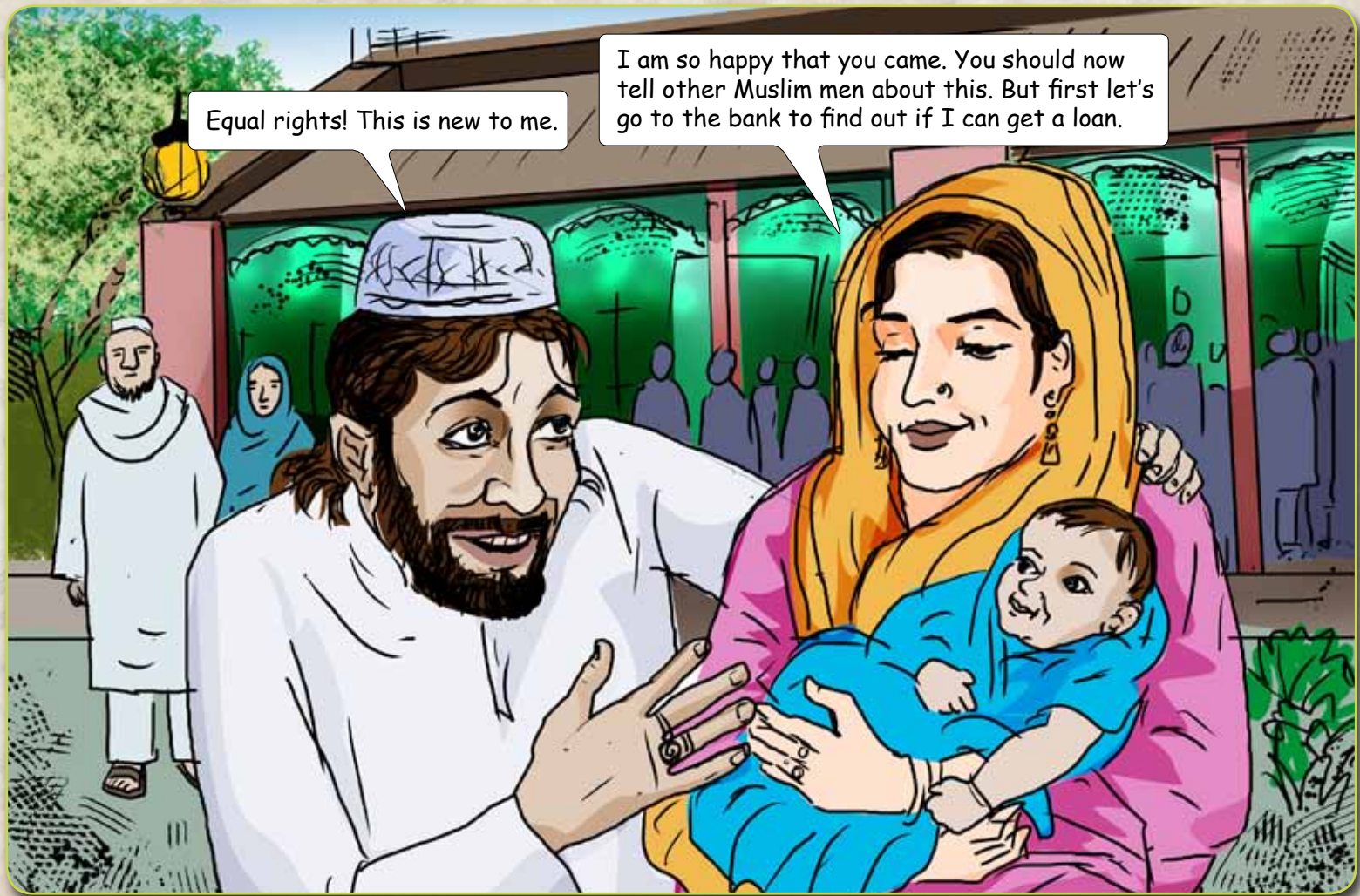
Yes, you should certainly go. It will be good for you and all of us.

At the next meeting a Bank Manager explains the loan process.



Meanwhile Javed attends a meeting for Muslim men.





Equal rights! This is new to me.

I am so happy that you came. You should now tell other Muslim men about this. But first let's go to the bank to find out if I can get a loan.

At the bank...

I am planning to start an embroidery business. I am good at it. Other groups have also done this. There are people who are willing to buy our work.

That is a very good idea. Let us get the loan first. If you start earning, our child will have a better future.



Six months later...

Butandi
Embroidery Works.

We have to go to the district level meeting of 12 Muslim women's groups tomorrow. We will share experiences and new ideas for our development.

We will also look for support for more services - enrollment in schools, pension, scholarships for girls etc.

You must go. Our community now depends on women like you. I wish I could have done this when I was your age.

And at the Women Welfare Foundation office, Salma apa takes stock of their programme.

MWI - Impact

- Women learn about rights under Islam and the Constitution
- Empowerment of Muslim women
- Religious and community leaders are a part of the programme
- Youth and men are also trained on gender issues
- Women's collectives advocate for women's rights
- Collectives also involved in micro-credit and

income generating activities

- Community support structures are formed to protect and promote women's rights
- Linkages with government welfare programs and service delivery systems established
- Misconceptions about Islam and women rights are removed
- Building an understanding of women's identities as citizens and part of the mainstream of Indian democracy.



The MWI process has built our confidence. We now ask questions of community leaders and government officials, use legal services, courts and even go to the police, when needed.

We have learned vocational skills and become economically independent.

Our daughters now go to school, and we live with dignity and respect. The curriculum on Muslim Women's Rights has made the youth active in protecting and promoting women's rights.

We can campaign against polygamy, dowry and child marriage, encourage political participation and so much more.



A training programme on graphic books / comic-making was organised for 20 women from the Muslim Women's Initiative programme at Bangalore in March 2010. In the process of drawing comics based on their experiences, the women shared stories of their real life. The stories highlighted both their problems and issues as well as the achievements and impact of the Muslim Women's Initiative.



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Arshi lives with her husband in a lower middle class area in Ajmer. Abuse and violence are common in her domestic life. One day she hears an announcement on the radio about a programme on Women's Rights. Arshi decides to attend the meetings - which change her life.

The equal status of women in society as stated in the Holy Qur'an and the Indian Constitution are explained at these meetings. Arshi also takes her mother-in-law, husband and friends to attend the meetings. This brings a change in the family environment.

Arshi also gets advice and support to obtain a loan from the bank to start an embroidery business. She slowly becomes a role model and a catalyst for change in her community. This is the story of Arshi and thousands of women like her whose lives have been transformed by the Muslim Women's Initiative.



Muslim Women's Initiative Partners

- Gharib Nawaz Mahila Avum Bal Kalyan Samiti (Ajmer)
- Group for Urban and Rural Development (Mysore)
- Sabala (Bijapur)
- Spurthi Mahila Mandali (Bijapur)
- Visthar (Bangalore)