

## ***Conference Report***

### **The Status of Muslim Women in Contemporary Societies: Realities and Prospects**

The international conference on “The Status of Muslim Women in Contemporary Societies: Realities and Prospects” was held at the Renaissance Hotel, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, August 14–16, 2007. It was jointly organised by the International Institute for Muslim Unity (IIMU) and the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), and co-sponsored by the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, Malaysia (KPWKM) and World Assembly of Muslim Youth, Malaysia (WAMY).

A major strength of this Conference was the presence of promising Arab voices expressing the deep concern of the Arab World for the empowerment of women in various domains. Representing sixteen countries, the participants explored the challenges faced by Muslim women in this globalised world. The strategies to face these challenges were presented through the keynote address and 118 papers of which 84 were in Arabic.

Of the participants, 51 were from Malaysia. Of the remaining 67, 42 were from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and 8 from the United Arab Emirates. The participants represented various disciplines including law, history, political science, economics, mass media, sociology, psychology, Islamic studies, education, and medicine. The participation of males and females was almost equal. The Conference attracted a good deal of public attention.

#### **Rationale**

The three-day International Conference was held to draw the attention of intellectuals, leaders, policymakers, and activists from all over the world to the problems and challenges faced by Muslim women

in the religious, political, cultural, economic and other fields, to critically examine the realities of the status of Muslim women; and to recommend practical mechanisms to elevate the status of Muslim women throughout the world. The aspirations of the Muslim world to meet the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century demand that the Muslim women play a more active role in nation building. Islam, being a dynamic and universal way of life, assigns Muslim women a special role in society.

The challenges before Muslims are to translate the dynamism inherent in Islam in terms of the contemporary context and to enable the Muslim women to realise their potential and meet the challenges. Professor Hassan Ahmed Ibrahim, the Director of the IIMU, hoped that “the panelists will engage in a constructive dialogue that will illustrate the distinguished status that Islam gives to women and highlight that the religion which masterminded a gigantic leap for the liberation of women fourteen centuries ago could not possibly preach their degradation.”

### **The Inaugural Speech**

Seri Paduka Baginda Raja Permaisuri Agong, Tuanku Nur Zahirah (Her Majesty the Queen of Malaysia), officially declared the Conference open. The welcoming speech was delivered by the Rector of the IIUM, Professor Dr. Syed Arabi Idid, who emphasised the role of IIUM in correcting the tarnished image of Muslim women all over the world.

In another important speech, the President of IIMU, Tan Sri Dato' Sri Sanusi bin Junid, stressed that from a historical perspective, Muslim women have been very active in fighting colonialism and building Islamic civilisation. He cited a woman named Hayati who led the fight against the Portuguese in Melaka after her husband was defeated.

However, with the passage of time, things changed and women were marginalised. Thus, the Muslim world has denied itself the skills and resources of more than half of its population. He hoped the Conference participants would diligently discuss the issue of women's rights and responsibilities for the development of the Ummah.

### **The Keynote Address**

The keynote address was presented by Emeritus Prof. Datuk Dr. Nik Safiah Karim. In her paper, “Women’s Progress: Challenges and Achievements,” she argues that Malaysian women have faced numerous challenges in the pre-independence and post-independent periods. Alongside men, they struggled to achieve independence and later worked shoulder to shoulder to raise their position in society. In the recent past, NGOs have played a vital role in advancing the cause of women in Malaysia.

In 1945, women began to venture into the political arena by establishing the Women’s Wing of UMNO. However, despite some progress, Malaysian women have not been too successful in the political field. Today, women’s representation in the ministry, cabinet, and secretariat is negligible compared to that of men.

Malaysian women have responded to the challenges of rapidly changing socio-economic opportunities by participating intensively in the national labour force. There have also emerged “women NGOs” that caters for “the needs of women through the provision of welfare services and non-formal education, and have addressed the needs of the various groups, especially the rural women.”

With education and determination, Malaysian women haven taken a strong position in pursuing their own advancement and have joined forces with other women from all over the world to address crucial matters relating to them. Malaysian women actively participated in the first Women Conference in 1975 and subsequent World Conferences in Copenhagen in 1980, in Nairobi in 1985, and in Beijing in 1995 as well as various other meetings worldwide. She appreciated the efforts made by the Government of Malaysia to empower women and for establishing the Ministry of Women’s Affairs on January 17, 2001. Dr. Nik Safiah Karim concluded the keynote speech with the assertion that “Malaysian women today have made tremendous achievements and are looking forward to a brighter future.”

### **Conference Themes and Papers**

The papers presented during the conference may be summarised under eight major categories as follows:

### **Political Realities and Prospects**

The major discussion revolved around the fact that Muslim women lack political rights in contemporary societies. Islam has granted rights for women in political participation and historically they have made contributions in the political arena. Women took part in the battle of Jamal, conducted diplomatic relations as exemplified by the Queen of Saba, and narrated *ahādīth*. Many scholars have pointed out that the Prophet (SAW) treated women with respect, and that men are accorded higher ranks due to the responsibilities they have to carry out. In contemporary times, women in Oman, Palestine, Malaysia and other places are taking part in the development of their respective societies. Yet, there is much misunderstanding over such issues as veiling, freedom of women and their role in the public sphere. It was emphasised that in Muslim societies, the contributions of women need to be reassessed, and they should have greater access to freedom and participation in decision-making processes.

Several papers pointed out that throughout Islamic history women, such as ‘Āishah (R), Zubaydah, and Shajarat al-Durr, provided political leadership to their respective people. In contemporary times, Muslim women are playing leadership role as prime ministers, ministers, and judges in Bangladesh, Pakistan, Malaysia, Turkey and other places. Their leadership skill should be fully utilised to meet the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, several papers argued that in the enthusiasm for political participation, women must not neglect their responsibilities towards the family and children.

### **Socio-cultural Aspects**

Discussion on the socio-cultural theme took up one full day of seven sessions. Several papers illustrated that in the early era of Islam, women participated in the construction and maintenance of mosques and other welfare centres together with men. It was pointed out that Muslim women in Australia, Malaysia and Turkey have managed to empower themselves through education, are actively pursuing their careers, and are contributing to societal development in myriad ways. Nevertheless, in this era of globalisation, they suffer cultural limitations and are subjected to discrimination in mosques, in the employment sector and other public places. Some papers focused

on the challenges faced by women in balancing their responsibilities in the home and the workplace. A few papers raised the issue of Muslim women in Malaysia and other countries engaging in illicit relationships and illegal activities such as street racing.

Several papers emphasised the need to rely on Islamic values to preserve and defend the institution of family against the global “anti-family” forces. They cited as an example the feminist movement which targets the Muslim women to seek equality of gender in all aspects of life, and to reinterpret the Qur’ānic text in terms of a unisex society. It was suggested that the corrective measures, in this respect, should include paying attention to the honourable position given by Allah (SWT) to women and to implement the Islamic vision of Human Rights as enshrined in the Qur’ān and *ḥadīth*.

### **Health Issues**

Several papers pointed out that the number of people infected with HIV/AIDS is rapidly increasing all over the world including the Muslim world. In sub-Saharan Africa, almost sixty percent of people living with AIDS in 2006 were women; and the number of AIDS cases reported in Arab countries has increased by 300% in the past three years. Since issues related to sexuality are regarded as “taboo” topics of discussion, Muslim women are reluctant and ashamed to go for proper treatment due to the religious doctrine concerning illicit sex and drug related practices.

Overall, social stigma, boycott, violence and discrimination are considered the main cause for women suffering from diseases and not seeking medical assistance. Therefore, it was suggested that comprehensive sexuality education should be implemented to disseminate sex and reproductive health information to Muslim men and women alike. It was also suggested that traditionalist individuals, policy-makers, and religious groups should change their thinking and promote greater involvement of Muslim women in healthcare sectors such as nursing.

### **Media and Muslim Women**

Scholars agreed that the Western media generally portray a negative picture of Muslim women wearing veils. Even the Arab media tend

to present veiled, modest women in a poor light and to encourage them to wear Western-style dress. Muslims must do everything possible to counter such negative media portrayal. This is necessary because the media are in danger of becoming the “new god” to be worshipped by Muslim women. Muslims should have powerful media of their own to depict the true identity, rights and integrity of Muslim women and their Islamic values.

### **Educational Institutions**

Islam emphasises educating both men and women alike. Muslim women from the first generation of Islam have shown deep interest in studying the *ḥadīth* of the Prophet (SAW), and have contributed a great deal to the development of the science of *ḥadīth*. They have contributed in academia, the business and financial sectors, medicine and science, and numerous other fields of knowledge.

Scholars agreed that women should get proper educational facilities to nourish their intellectual capabilities in accordance with Islamic principles. Women’s attainment of proper education can ensure an educated next generation, as they are the prime educators of their children. However, attempts be made to ensure that the educational system is based upon Islamic principles.

### **Economic Development**

On the issue of economic prospects, some speakers believed that economic participation of women is essential as they are the “other half” of the total resource/human capital available for attaining economic development. However, many Muslim women have been forced to accept certain occupations which have subjected them to violence, harassment, and intimidation, and therefore resulted in their loss of respect and honour. Some papers compared the economic freedom granted to women in Islam and in the West and highlighted that Islam had provided numerous economic opportunities for women fourteen centuries ago. Islam does not prohibit women from engaging in the labour force as long as their honour is preserved. Therefore, it was suggested that women’s participation in economic venture should be encouraged provided they are able to take care of their family life efficiently.

### **Conference Resolutions/Recommendations**

The three-day conference on the Status of Muslim Women concluded on Thursday, August 16, 2007. The Conference resolved that:

1. Muslim governments should provide medical screening for couples who are intending to get married in order to curb the accelerating AIDS problem.
2. The crucial importance of the nursing profession should be highlighted and emphasised through education and other relevant means.
3. The image of Muslim women should be projected positively in and by the mass media.
4. Women should have increasing opportunities to play an effective role in decision making in the public and private sectors.
5. A coordinating unit, under IIMU, should be established to follow up on women issues in the world and to set up a database of Muslim women's expertise/Muslim women NGOs for the purpose of coordination and networking.
6. A professional international commission should be set up to deal with issues pertaining to women and Islam in the light of contemporary challenges.
7. Policy makers and legislators should allow Muslim women to participate in nation building activities at all levels.
8. The education of women must be made compulsory in all Muslim countries and communities.
9. The noble teachings of Islam should not be associated with the discrimination and marginalisation of the role of women.
10. Religious and educational institutions in the Muslim world are urged to review their curricula and include women issues to enable them to face the new realities and challenges.
11. Muslim governments and corporations are urged to give working women extended maternity leave to take full care of newborns.

Finally, the conference considers that giving women the right to decide what is best for their own development and advancement

can ensure the alleviation of their future prospects. In addition, men should work shoulder to shoulder with women for the improvement of the society, rather than considering them as a distinct entity. It is expected that the IIMU and IIUM will take practical initiatives to monitor the progress in the implementation of the Conference recommendations.

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