



**Welcome Speech at the Musawah Feast of Equals  
Zainah Anwar, Musawah Project Director  
13 February 2009  
Prince Hotel, Kuala Lumpur**

Asmkm wrb

Yang Berbahagia, Dato' Sri Shahrizat Abdul Jalil, Advisor to the Prime Minister on Women and Social Development and head of SENADA, the newly formed secretariat for the advancement of the status of Muslim Women in Malaysia.

Prof Yakin Erturk, the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women,

Ladies and Gentlemen, Good Evening.

This is an incredible sight from up here. 350 women and men from 47 countries all together to demand that there must be equality and justice in the Muslim family.

Welcome to this Feast of Equals, our gala dinner to mark the opening of the Global Meeting to launch Musawah, the Global Movement for Equality and Justice in the Muslim Family.

Ladies and Gentlemen, as they say, nothing is more powerful than an idea whose time has come.

This dinner is to celebrate why we are all here tonight. We are here because we believe that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century there cannot be justice without equality. We are here because we believe that Islam upholds the principles of equality and justice. And we are here because we believe that there is hope and possibility to reconcile the teachings of Islam with human rights, with women's rights, with democracy... values that make up the dominant ethical paradigm of the world we live in today.

This event has been two years in the making. Two years – because we wanted it to be perfect, as perfect as possible.

We wanted our theoretical arguments to be watertight. We wanted arguments within Islam that justify change, that justify equality and justice. We invited the scholars we have been working with these past years to submit papers to argue why change is possible within the Qur'an, within *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) and why change is necessary given the realities of our lives in the twenty-first century. We wanted Musawah to have a strong theoretical grounding to open new horizons for thinking constructively about change and reform, and to claim back and recapture the diversity and dynamism that were once so integral to the Islamic legal tradition.

So tonight will see the launch of *Wanted: Equality and Justice in the Muslim Family*, a book of seven analytical papers which contains arguments supporting Musawah, our Global Movement for Equality and Justice in the Muslim Family.

It took two years, because we wanted this meeting to show the world that there is a movement out there of Muslim women and men, activists and scholars who have for decades worked on the issue of rights for Muslim women. Therefore we needed time to reach out to as many countries and as many groups as possible.

I am very proud to announce tonight that over 250 participants from 47 countries, including 32 countries that are members of the Organisation of Islamic Conference, have registered to participate in this ground breaking event. We have mobilised participants from 13 Asian countries including Southeast Asia, South Asia and Central Asia, 14 Middle Eastern countries, 14 African countries, and the Pacific, Europe, and North America.

Let me tell you, this was no easy job. Our outreach coordinator, Rozana Isa, gave birth to a beautiful baby girl in the midst of desperate phone calls, emails, faxes to and from participants from all continents of the world.

We are proud that amidst their busy lives trying to make the world a better place, participants from 31 countries submitted reports on why Equality is Possible and why Equality is Necessary within their country contexts, and identified the challenges they face and share the resources they have to enable them, to enable us, to fight for equality and justice in the family. We thank all of you. These reports have been compiled into a publication called Home Truths, a Global Report on Equality in the Muslim Family, meticulously summarised and edited by our Project Coordinator, Jana Rumminger.

Musawah also took two years in the making because we spent almost a year developing our Framework for Action. At our meeting in Cairo with 25 activists and scholars from 15 countries in December 2007, we developed the ideas and principles we wanted in the framework document to justify why equality is possible and why equality is necessary in Islam. Then we spent almost another year to consult more activists and scholars from over 30 countries to perfect the framework. Many of you are here today. Thank you.

This framework document which is now available in five languages, English, Arabic, French, Persian and Bahasa Malaysia provides us with the principles and values that will guide the work of Musawah. It can be used in various countries to help frame claims for just and equal Muslim family laws. The Framework builds on the seven papers in the WANTED book, using a holistic approach that brings together Islamic teachings, universal human rights principles, fundamental rights and constitutional guarantees, and the lived realities of women and men today.

You will all receive copies of these three publications tonight as you leave the room. And of course we expect you to devour every single word... because I promise you they all make for compelling reading.

Ladies and Gentlemen, this work is of course not possible without the dedication, passion and hard work of the 12 activists and scholars who make up the international planning committee. For two years, they have worked very closely with the team at Sisters in Islam to enable us to be where we are today. You will soon be introduced to all of them. And all of this would of course be impossible without the incredible dedication of the best team of staff,

members and volunteers who love Sisters in Islam and passionately believe in the cause. This must be the only conference where we had a waiting list of volunteers!

What Musawah hopes to achieve is to create a very visible national, regional and international presence of a movement led by Muslim women, demanding equality and justice within Islam, and demanding that Islam should not be used to discriminate against women in law and public policy.

Musawah is designed to bring together scholars and activists who wish to work within a holistic framework to ensure that Muslim women are treated as human beings of equal worth and dignity in the law, in the family and the community. Since so much of the injustice against Muslim women and the resistance to law reform are justified in the name of Islam, we feel that it is important that Musawah as a knowledge-building movement must have its key focus on acquiring knowledge and understanding why equality and change are possible and necessary within Islam.

This is what is special about what we bring to the larger women's and human rights movements. We assert that Islam can be a source of empowerment, not a source of oppression and discrimination. With our framework for action and our theoretical papers we aim to open new horizons for rethinking the relationship between human rights, equality and justice, and Islam. We want to open a new constructive dialogue where religion is no longer an obstacle to equality for women, but a source for liberation. Where governments and patriarchal authorities can no longer hide behind the convenience of using religion and the word of God to silence our demands for equality.

Let me say it again. For there to be justice in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there must be equality. It is as simple as that. It is as joyful as that. It is our hope that Musawah as a global movement will lead to that day when those in the Muslim world will realise that women's demands for equality and justice are neither alien nor a threat to Islam. They are rooted in the Islamic tradition, and they are what it takes for us to be respected as human beings of equal worth and dignity in the world. Equality and justice are non-negotiable—and these values must be at the core of what it means to be Muslim today.