



musawah

For Equality in the Family

Patriarchy-versus-Islam at day one of Musawah meeting

KUALA LUMPUR, February 14 -- Muslim women around the world are being denied access to their rightful inheritance and opportunities due to inequality in the family.

Speaking at the opening of the Musawah Global Meeting here, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women Yakin Ertürk said stereotypes of women, usually as mothers and housewives, allows for male hegemony over land, finances and actions towards women.

Armed conflict, occupation and militarist cultures, she said, also reinforce dominant discriminatory cultural paradigms.

Women's organisations working to introduce or reform laws to protect women's rights in the Muslim family have met with opposition from powerful quarters who argue in the name of religion and state-sanctioned patriarchy.

Musawah project director Zainah Anwar said laws made in the name of Islam cannot be unjust and discriminatory because justice and equality is intrinsic to the religion. She also said that the role and status of women have been set by conservative forces within Islam.

"They defined for us what Islam means, how to be a Muslim, how to be a good Muslim woman, wife and daughter and then prescribe for us laws and policies that keep us shackled as second-class Muslims and second-class citizens," she said in her opening speech.

The meeting's first plenary session, entitled "Equality in the Family is Necessary", also heard six other speakers from Egypt, the Gambia, Indonesia, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Kingdom who exchanged views on how Musawah could improve the daily lives of women in their countries.

Rangina Hamidi from Afghanistan noted that even today, the identity of an Afghan woman is linked to that of a male family member.

"Even when you die, you are only identified as someone's mother, daughter or wife, and not by your name," she said. This however, is not the result of the Taliban regime, but due to generations of an unjust social structure.

The message of Musawah, which advocates equality and justice in the Muslim family, is equally important for Muslim women in Europe. Shaista Gohir from the United

Kingdom noted that while Muslim women are protected by law as citizens, they may be subjected to discrimination in their family and community. Muslims in Europe are also affected by *fatwa* passed in other countries, even though the *fatwa* are completely removed from the realities of their daily lives.

Meanwhile, fellow speaker Maha Yamani, one of the few women lawyers in Saudi Arabia, said the position of Saudi Arabian Islamic scholarship was important in any discussion about the religion.

“Islam was revealed in the Arabian peninsular and the teachings of Islam through Prophet Muhammad raised the status of slaves, orphans and women. Today, the Saudi government prides itself on being the custodians of the two holy mosques, so indeed whatever is said about Islam in Saudi Arabia has a strong impact on the rest of the world,” she said.

Maha, who is barred from practising law in her home country because she is a woman, said that inequality in the family manifested itself in society too, and that women should find allies among men to work for a cohesive solution.

Isatou Touray from the Gambia is hopeful that the Musawah movement will help empower and educate women, including on issues concerning female genital mutilation, which she regards as the primary source of injustice over Muslim women in Africa.

Other speakers advocated positioning governments as stakeholders in any reform movement, for their support was vital in changing not just the relevant laws but the thinking that guides social behaviour.

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For more information, see the Musawah website: <http://www.musawah.org>.