



# musawah

For Equality in the Family

## **Women Need Allies in Parliament**

KUALA LUMPUR, February 15 -- Equality and justice in the Muslim family is unattainable without the support of legislators.

Speaking at the Musawah Global Meeting here, Fijian human rights activist Imrana Jalal said women's organisations must also seek alliances with members of political parties, both in government as well as in the opposition. This was the strategy used by Fiji's women's organisations in pushing for the country's recently-reformed family laws.

She stressed that the Musawah movement must also be led by indigenous organisations in order to avoid being labelled anti-religious. The messenger, she said, is just as important as the message.

Turkey has also adopted reforms in its civil and penal codes to elevate the status of women, and women's organisations are now campaigning for amendments to be made in the country's Constitution.

Women's rights activist Pinar Ilkcaracan said besides lobbying lawmakers, women's organisations must make women's issues part of the public agenda through strategic use of the media. She also said groups should take heed of development in other countries.

"Many Turkish parliamentarians resist law reforms relating to women, saying reforms will cause Turkish families to crumble. But we took Malaysia's law on violence against women to them, and because Malaysia is also a Muslim country, our parliamentarians approved it," she said.

Another speaker at the event, Amina Lemrini from Morocco, told the audience that mobilising women and making their physical presence felt had been key in the Moroccan women's movement. "We came out on the streets in protest and we marched to court," she said.

Amina was referring to a large protest organised by the Moroccan women's movement for family law reforms. Following the rally in 2004, the government approved several reforms, including allowing women to marry only with their consent, and to sign their own marriage contracts.

Strategies are different however, in conflict and post-conflict societies. The meeting's youngest panel speaker Roya Rahmani said working in these societies is tough because people are often not open to new ideas.

The Afghan activist was involved in drafting the country's first-ever marriage contract, which was approved by its Parliament in 2007. Although research and negotiations for the contract started as early as 1999, lobbying lawmakers proved to be the toughest challenge.

Prior to the contract, Afghan women were completely excluded from marriage negotiations. Male family members from the groom's side would negotiate the dowry with a male representative from the bride's family. Her dowry was also often misunderstood as a payment to be made only in the event of a divorce.

With the marriage contract, the bride is directly involved in negotiations and she is also legally entitled to education, employment as well as the right to divorce.

The best strategy, Roya added, is to start thorough groundwork early and to lobby lawmakers intensively. "The 2007 marriage contract is the work of generations of women. We must dare to dream big and realise it through small steps," she said.

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