



musawah

For Equality in the Family

Networking for Change: An Overview

Kuala Lumpur, February 15 -- If fundamental change is to occur in the quest for women's rights to equality and justice in a Muslim context, then women must create new institutions and claim the identity of their religion for themselves.

"Change comes from those who write the plot, and it is activists like us who influence many on the ground," said Daisy Khan from the Women's Islamic Initiative in Spirituality and Equality (WISE).

Khan also said that strength can be found in numbers, and with 750 million Muslim women in the world – which equals one sixth of the world's population – focus can be maintained on real issues. She also believes that there is an ongoing female religious revival, where more and more women want to define themselves through religion.

Her organisation WISE is centred on four goals: establishing an alternative *shura* council, creating a female mufti (scholar) programme, establishing a Muslim women's fund and supporting online communication for the concerns of the Muslim woman.

Khan was speaking at the sixth plenary session of the Musawah Global Meeting, which provided an overview of current women's networks and organisations that operate on an international level.

Fellow speaker Zarizana Abdul Aziz of Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLMUL) questioned the discrepancy between Islamic finance, which is rich in interpretation and enjoys a robust and dynamic interaction between *fiqh* and financial markets, and the way Islamic laws are deemed immutable when it involves women.

Zarizana is also concerned not only with the impact of the law on Muslim women, but also on non-Muslim women.

"The interaction of Muslim laws has an impact on Muslims and non-Muslims alike. When it becomes public policy, it should be opened to public debate, and those affected should have a right to question and discuss the laws."

"We link groups locally, regionally, and internationally; women living in countries where either Islam is a state religion, or a community that is governed by religious laws, and those who categorise themselves as Muslims," said Zarizana.

WLMUL conducts many mutual programmes where there is support for solidarity, information exchange, capacity-building and training, publishing, Qur'anic interpretations, and campaigns.

Executive director of the Women's Learning Partnership (WLP) Rakhee Goyal followed with the view that women need to be equipped with the necessary leadership skills in order to carve a better future.

"The essence of the leadership programme is that every woman can be a leader. There are skills to be learned, but the important thing is to come together and mobilise a vision that we all have so that we can change social norms and legal structures to ensure gender equality," said Goyal.

WLP is a unique partnership with 20 autonomous constituents across four continents and 17 languages. Besides a shared vision of leadership training and human rights advocacy, Goyal emphasises that each approach in human rights methodology is contextualised and adapted to the cultural setting of the host country.

Meanwhile, the Coalition for Sexual and Bodily Rights in Muslim Societies was set up in 2001 and bridges more than 40 members and activists, non-governmental organisations and academic institutions from the Middle East, North Africa and Southeast Asia.

Its representative Pinar Ilkcaracan believes that sexuality is not and should not be made a private issue, as they are part of the political and social fabric of society.

"Religion is often misused as a powerful instrument of control and sexual oppression, with the goal of legitimising human rights abuses," said Ilkcaracan.

Lastly, Azza Karam from the UNFPA said that 40 per cent of basic healthcare in the developing world is provided for via faith-based organisations, and up to 60 per cent in war-torn countries. Ninety per cent of these organisations are run and led by women.

"If we are going to talk about sex and sexual reproductive health, we cannot do that without targeting the people who influence the way we think, believe and behave; that, is the faith-based world," said Karam.

The UNFPA's principles of engagement with the faith-based world include forging strategic issue-based alliances, providing an equal platform and level playing field, and ensuring transparency and accountability.

The most important principle however, is respect for other's methods and approaches.

"We all have our own languages, our own ways of doing things. We must appreciate that doing things a different way is not necessarily a bad thing."

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