



musawah

For Equality in the Family

Research is important in shaping indigenous feminism

KUALA LUMPUR, February 16 – Research into the women’s movement cannot simply be a process of accumulating data, but must also be a tool for changing social attitudes.

At the seventh plenary session of the Musawah Global Meeting here today, women’s rights activist Vivienne Wee said research showed that women need a discursive space in the public sphere, without which they are left to struggle alone in fragmented families. Women must have the avenue to question, challenge and transform power relations that are unfavourable to them.

Wee is involved in an ongoing multi-country research programme, the Women’s Empowerment in Muslim Contexts (WEMC). The research is focused on Asian countries, particularly Pakistan, Iran, Indonesia and China.

Some of the key questions in the WEMC research include trying to find out how women empower themselves, how they overcome forces that obstruct this process of empowerment and how they mobilise supportive forces.

The research is meant to create indigenous feminism by identifying local causes of discrimination and defining local solutions. This is especially important in Asian societies, where women’s movements are often accused of taking on a Western agenda.

Sisters in Islam’s (SIS) study on the impact of polygamy on the quality of family life among Muslims in Malaysia is also another example of localising the women’s movement. Findings from the research are used to advocate reforms in Islamic family law.

SIS spokesperson Masjaliza Hamzah said the research findings are important in raising awareness among lawmakers and civil society on the impact of polygamy on families. They are also crucial in policy formulation as well as pre-marital courses.

Meanwhile, the Association for Women’s Rights in Development’s (AWID) survey found respondents defining religious fundamentalism as anti-women and patriarchal. Furthermore, 76 per cent of those surveyed feel that religious fundamentalism has increased globally in the last 10 years.

Shareen Gokal of AWID said some of the causes for the rise of religious fundamentalism include the growing gap between the rich and poor, the global political role of the United States, the influence of foreign funding, weak state institutions as well as the politics of identity and nationalism.

“Based on our research findings, religious fundamentalists are often seen as pro-poor, less corrupt than other political forces and defending local traditions in the face of globalisation,” she said.

They are also seen as family-friendly, despite the fact that they are reinstating men’s control over women. The study, which surveyed women’s organisations from countries around the world, also found that 18 per cent of the respondents believe religious fundamentalists champion religion.

The impact of religious fundamentalism, she said, is mostly felt in areas relating to morality, sexuality, reproductive rights and health, as well as development and civil society participation for women.

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