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WISE second conference: “Muslim Women: Building Institutions, Creating Change”

Muslim women set the record straight

[Nadia Al-Sakkaf](#)

Strong spirited campaigns to promote women’s advancement and to reform the image of Islam, especially from the Muslim women’s perspective, overwhelmed the participants at the second Women Islamic Initiative in Spirituality and Equality (WISE) conference. They pledged to fight violence and create change for Muslim women around the world.

Two hundred professional Muslim women from 55 countries travelled for hours and even days to congregate in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia for four days to exchange experiences and plan strategies for change.

“Malaysia was the choice of venue because of the remarkable Malaysian experience in promoting women as equal to men while maintaining Muslim identity,” said Daisy Khan, executive director of WISE at the 2009 conference.

The WISE program aims to empower Muslim women to fully participate in their communities and nations as well as to amplify their voices at all levels of political, economic, religious and social discourse. By creating the infrastructure and processes for Muslim women to join together and challenge the distorted interpretations of Islam and by increasing their social and economic self-determination, WISE aims to change the status of Muslim women around the world. This global network of individuals, groups, organizations, institutions and communities uses the teachings of Islam – both as inspiration and justification – for Muslim women’s empowerment.

In 2006, the first WISE conference was organized in New York City, USA and was attended by 175 Muslim women scholars, activists, artists, and religious and civil society members from 26 countries.

Like any organization, it has grown over time through the efforts of courageous and dedicated people who believe in their objective and aspire to achieve their vision.

“I am a physician and I have seen so much during my work. I realized that for women’s development in poor countries, fundamental Islam needs to be embraced in the true sense,” said Dr. Nafis Sadik, member of the WISE Team and Steering Committee.

She explained that the distorted image of Islam and interpretations conceived by traditional Muslim scholars have misrepresented Islam, saying that it is time for women to play a role in Islam to promote equality in humanity.

Daisy says she started this initiative because of 9/11. "Wherever I went, Americans would ask three questions constantly: Why is Islam such a violent religion? Why are Muslims so oppressive towards their women? And what are the Muslim leaders doing about this?"

"The issue of women's rights is more than an issue for women or about women. It involves everyone," said Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, founder and CEO of the American Society for Muslim Advancement (ASMA Society) and the Imam of Masjid Al-Farah, a mosque in New York City.

"The best of you are those who are best to their women. Consequently, the worst of men are those who are worst to their women," Rauf said.

Change through communication

Muslim woman across the globe work through communication and media to create change. The WISE conference specifically included a session on creating change through communication, in which two case studies were presented on how media can be effective in creating change. The first was Yemen Times' case study on early marriage taking up the story of the nine year old girl Nujood Ali who was married off by her father and who eventually became the symbol of Yemen's fight against premature marriages. Yemen Times lead national and international media and worked side by side with advocates and human right activists to push for a law to prevent such marriages. After almost one year, in April 2009 a law was passed that prevents marriages for boys and girls under the age of 17. This law has yet to be implemented or have an endorsement mechanism, and women's institutions are working with parliamentarians on this issue.

The second case was of the campaign through Beliefnet, an online magazine originating from the USA that worked to explain and educate the American public on the issue of the hijab. Dilshad Ali who worked on this campaign explained how Beliefnet used its online pages to promote a better understanding of Muslim dress code. She narrated the various phases of the campaign and how the web magazine received positive feedback from many readers.

The presentations were followed by a question and answer session and then by group discussions whereby the participants commented on the case studies and identified ways to reflect the experiences in their work. They agreed that media stereotyping is of Muslims in general and Muslim women in particular is a barrier against change and that for women's image to change, the way media portrays them must change. They also agreed that friendly media icons and international figures can help in the campaign for change. Moreover, for communication to be effective in reforming Islam's practices, Sharia'a law needs to be translated into practical laws and not left to the Muftis, or religious preachers, to define what is allowed and what is not.

The creation of an online portal connecting Muslim women globally was appreciated, and participants agreed that it would be helpful to facilitate communication among the WISE community and for those who want to know more.

Change through Philanthropy

For any change to happen, financial resources are needed. The WISE initiative launched the Muslim Women's Fund which will facilitate projects for change in

Muslim communities worldwide, especially those projects that aim at enabling Muslim women.

In 2006, five women inspired by each other decided to create a financial program to facilitate change. The Muslim Women's Fund was created to strengthen women, benefit families and communities and build bridges to peace. It aims to enable women to become stakeholders in their society. Its mission is to enable women to reclaim their human rights in Islam through education and economic empowerment.

There are 600 million Muslim women in the world. The fund will prioritize education, economic independence and women's rights, aiming to create social change. Today, the priority is "Jihad against Violence." An aggressive fund raising campaign for the fund made donations very compelling, as the campaign was able to capture the stories of where intervention can make a difference.

Two case studies were presented in this session. Nani Zulminarni from Indonesia talked about the Economic Empowerment to Social Movement and how it was used to achieve prosperity and dignity for Muslim women. She discussed how women need to change from dependant passive recipients of handouts to empowered women who solve problems and take initiatives, relating that in this way, women will stop being victims.

The second case study was presented by Shireen Zaman from the USA on leveraging corporate social responsibility for women's progress. She talked about private companies that dedicated money on regular basis to fund development projects aimed at empowering women, relating that a mind shift is needed from giving money as a form of charity which aims at helping an urgent need into philanthropy to empower and create sustainable development. The latter allows much more interactivity and connection between the donors and the beneficiaries.

One of the early projects of the Muslim Women's Fund was the successful elimination of Female Genital Mutilation in an Egyptian village. Eman Fawzy explained how she convinced the two people who carried out the FGM practice to drop it and take up another profession. "When we reasoned with them, we discovered that for them it was a job like any other job. In fact, they did not like doing it but it was their source of living. When we helped them establish their own small businesses with the support of the fund, FGM was no longer practiced in that community," she said.

The discussions following the presentations commended the two case studies and highlighted that Islam in essence calls for women's rights according to the Prophet Mohammed's saying, "See that women are maintained in the rights assigned to them."

Participants discussed how a lack of financial resources is a great obstacle against development and that women and children are usually the most vulnerable in any society and are the most victimized. Also discussed was that funding generally stays in cities or urban areas where the need is less compared to the rural areas. Participants were encouraged from the private sector social responsibility case and decided they will knock on company's doors to get them on board the campaign for women's development.

Change through Interpretation and through collaboration

In the last thousand years, not a single woman scholar appeared who could legislate and issue fatwas defining what is right and what is not right based on Islamic jurisprudence. Men held a tight monopoly over religion and interpreted Islam from

their own point of view. This is why WISE launched the Shoura Council, an initiative that aims at creating a group of women Islamic scholars who are internationally qualified and able to present Islam from an unbiased angle.

Three women scholars talked about their personal experiences and their battles against the exclusion of women in the religious leadership sphere. Amina Wadud from the USA, Sa'diyya Shaikh from South Africa and Musdah Mulia from Indonesia told their stories proving to the attendees that in Islam, women can be a part of the religious ruling class and lead congregations or advocate for women in laws.

The Jihad Against Violence was launched in the session whereby women stood up and pledged to defend peace and reclaim the word 'Jihad,' which in essence means 'struggle' and has nothing to do with terrorism.

"It is time we did right by our religion and cleared it from the vast misconceptions advocated for by extremists. We pledge to defend Islam through peace and show the world that Muslim women are capable of being strong peace advocates," said Afra Jalabi as she introduced the concept of the Jihad Against Violence campaign and encouraged women to pledge for it.

Peace and development are not an issue limited to one faith or a specific religion. Muslims join hands with others of any faith or religion in humanity to achieve a common objective.

Three panelists from three different religions talked about how collaboration through different faiths can create change and have a strong impact on society. Rev. Serene Jones from the US, Rori Picker-Neiss also from the US and K. Thilagawathi Kanagaretnam from Malaysia talked about their personal experiences and how in their work they reach out to communities of other religions to create change.