

## **MUSLIM WOMEN: HEAR US, SEE US**

### **MUSLIMS AT RISK**

I consider myself a fortunate person (in so far as Muslims can count themselves fortunate). I am a Muslim woman born in Southeast Asia. Some of you may see us as the periphery of the Islamic world but our region is home to the biggest number of Muslims in the world. Southeast Asia has a rich experience in homegrown democracy after overthrowing our colonial masters. We live in a multi-ethnic region which has a tradition of tolerance and peaceful coexistence, where men and women both play active roles in both public and private arenas. Southeast Asian Muslim women enjoy liberties denied many of our sisters in the Middle East, the heartland of Islam.

However, our world is changing and our liberties are at risk. It has been over 5 years and we in Muslim Southeast Asia are still grappling with the aftershocks of 9/11. In the minority Muslim areas of Thailand and the Philippines, for instance, our liberties are at risk from internal conflicts with central government, taken to a new level and complicated by the war on terror. The radicalization of Muslim groups, the expansion of an extremist religious interpretation of Islam, does not help us. We are at risk from within and from without.

### **THE GLOBALIZATION OF RADICAL ISLAM**

The radicalization of Muslim communities in the Southeast Asian region is rooted in the need to survive – physically as well as culturally. It has been shaped by reaction to the

impact of the “intrusive West.” Muslim communities are being radicalized proportionate to their failure to “modernize” themselves relative to their environments. Pressures on non-Western societies are gathering force under globalization. Globalization has been seen as a threat, an imposition to a people’s identity and culture. Modernization can be traumatic, particularly if forced and hasty, and the transformation away from tradition puts societies under deep distress.

In its 2000 world development report, the World Bank identified two seemingly contradictory forces affecting the world order: *globalization* and *localization*. Globalization forces national governments to go beyond their borders in order to cope up with the progressive integration of world economies while localization manifests itself in the increasing assertion of local people for political or religious identities. This seems to be one of the paradoxes of globalization; as world capital, trade, finance become integrated, local identities tend to resist these homogenizing processes.

It is in this context that we should address the issues of democratization, radicalization and women’s rights in Muslim communities. I note that radical Islam has been fuelled principally by the negative impacts of globalization. I can see that a global military war on terror may not be a sufficient response to terror threats. Killing the terrorists will not end terrorism. I suggest is that it is the same globalization forces that may provide the key to addressing this problem. I refer to the global wave of democratization, I mean genuine democratization (On the web, a bumper sticker is circulating that says “Be nice to Americans or we will come and democratize you”). Genuine democracy, which will

provide more space for the marginalized (like Muslim women) will be able to temper this inclination towards extremist advocacies.

Many political analysts conclude that western dominance had impressed on the Muslim world a sense of its weaknesses, which has led to Islamism. Islamism is the expression – in religious terms – of frustration over the failure of modernization in much of the Muslim world. Islamism is a rebellion of the excluded, the marginalized which feeds on the frustrations of impoverished peoples living on the margins of an unattainable consumerist world. The key emotion in this revolt is anti-Americanism. The US has become the surrogate of all the Western powers that have tried to shape the world in their image over the last 500 years. It is this rabid anti-Americanism that fuels global terror activities.

For marginalized minority Muslim communities in the Philippines, democratization is at odds with the state's priority on peace and order, linked as it is with the global war against terror.

#### **MUSLIM WOMEN IN AREAS OF CONFLICT**

While the Philippines generally observes religious tolerance and accommodates the needs of ethnic and religious minorities, the worsening discrimination against Muslims and the socio-economic conditions experienced by Muslims are barriers to peace and development. More so for Muslim women.

Due to the government's campaign against terror, hundreds of Muslims have been illegally detained. I have had several discussions with the Philippine Commission on Human Rights. In 2005, the CHR initiated the study "Human Rights Condition of Muslim Women and Children in Detention". Allegedly, terrorist suspects were hauled off to jail together with their wives and children without the benefit of due process.

Muslim women and children detainees were interviewed in jails throughout Metro Manila. Based on their findings there were a total of 203 Muslim women and 14 children detainees as of June 2005. The study indicates that the manner of apprehension of Muslim women and children suspects cast doubts on the guilt of the accused. 212 of the 214 detained Muslim women and minors were arrested without warrants of arrest. Moreover, 89 of those arrested without warrants did not know the identity of the arresting officer or law enforcement agency. Worse, documented cases of abuse include asking those apprehended to strip themselves naked for the police authorities to readily go over their clothes for hidden drugs.

This reflects not only the lack of transparency among our law enforcing agency but also a disregard for rights of the accused, supposed to be guaranteed under the equal protection clause of our Constitution. Is this because we are Muslim?

In the Philippines, ten years after signing a Final Peace Agreement in 1996, government troops have engaged the Moro National Liberation Front groups loyal to MNLF Chairman Nur Misuari in the island of Jolo. Sporadic fighting between the MNLF and government troops has unraveled the peace accord since 2001, when Misuari was jailed

on charges of rebellion. A few weeks ago, fierce fighting between the two sides has led to 50,000 displaced persons. As usual, it is the women who bear the burden of caring for their families as they escape the fighting. Last week, Muslim women led the lobbying for government and the MNLF to declare a ceasefire and return to negotiations. Our plea has fallen on deaf ears.

We Muslim women of the Philippines are caught between a rock and a hard place. The rock is the state's militarization and the oppressive form it predominantly takes in securing the peace. Ignorance about the Muslim faith makes many leaders tend to perceive our religion itself as a threat. The hard place is the aggregation of extremist fundamentalist groups who want to monopolize Islam. These groups accuse anyone talking of democracy, moderation, equality between men and women, of being un-Islamic or anti-Islam. These groups tend to focus on women's obligations, and not on women's rights.

### **WOMEN AND CANARIES**

A new wave of democratization is sweeping Muslim Southeast Asia, even as the world is still embroiled in the war against terror. The imperative today is to understand what kind of democracy Muslim communities want, to determine the appropriate means for its achievement, and to work towards its realization. In the evolution of democracy in our communities, what role will women play, together with men?

A friend told me that women's rights in democratizing or democratic Muslim societies are like canaries in a coalmine during the industrial age of the West. If the canaries are safe, so is the coalmine. Thus if women's rights are strong, so is the society.

The widening of the democratic space throughout the Southeast Asian region, which allows for freedom of expression and pluralism, has also opened the door further to radicalism and fundamentalist ideologies. On the extreme end, fundamentalist interpretations of *Sharia* endanger the equality between men and women, as very orthodox *ulama* move for interpretations close to the *Taliban* model of *Sharia*.

However, if the democratization process is home-grown and nurtured, it will take root and balance the more radical influences. Witness the successes in Southeast Asian countries like Indonesia and Malaysia in discussions of women's rights. Even as more fundamentalist interpretations of Islamic jurisprudence are entering Southeast Asia from the Middle East, our Malaysian and Indonesian sisters continuously engage the male-dominated leadership of the community to define a more gender-fair, more just, legal framework for both women and men. Even in the Philippines, as burdened as we are, Muslim women still have opportunities provided by law to participate as equals.

Unfortunately, many leaders have become adept at promising democratic reforms while delivering more oppression. This has created an environment of great disappointment and frustration, especially among women.

What can we Muslim women do, especially those of us who are in areas of conflict and who belong to minority communities?

How do we participate in the areas of welfare and development? Do women have a role in the development of the economic agenda vis a vis social policies? Are women's capabilities enhanced or undermined? In the field of governance, do we use our powers to

make government accountable and responsive to its constituents and our agenda? In the political arena, do we have a role to play? Do we have a constituency? Are women effectively represented in political parties and in national legislatures? Are we a political force? Lastly, as conservatism rises in the Islamic world, are our rights being suppressed? What do we do?

(I am thankful for the efforts of the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy in organizing this conference. The questions I raised as I was preparing for this conference have been answered by the experiences of my sisters from other communities.)

### **Empower Women, Strengthen Peace**

My parents believed in equality between men and women, citing the relationship between the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and his wife Khadija. My mother, a former Senator, taught all her sons and daughters to cook, go to market, and keep a clean house. My father, a member of Cabinet, supported all his children's participation in extra-curricular activities. A political leader, he encouraged my mother to enter politics once he saw her potential. As my parents supported my three brothers' aspirations to play music and be part of the school band, they nurtured their daughters' growing interest in debate and school politics.

My sisters and I therefore grew up believing in our own capacity and responsibility to work for a better life for ourselves, our families and our community. Today, I find it incredible that what my parents taught their daughters is under attack as un-Islamic by some leaders.

Globalization, mass education and mass communication are processes that are beginning to change perceptions of women in the Moslem world. Our Islamic world cannot exist behind the so-called divide described in the “Clash of Civilizations.” We need to learn how to live in a world that is rapidly modernizing. In a world where information highways connect communities in the blink of an eye, there can be no isolated islands.

There is an emerging women’s activism in Southeast Asian Muslim communities, even in the minority communities of the Philippines. In the areas of conflict, the activism is a direct response to the double burden women bear. First, we have become primarily responsible for the welfare of their families but lack access to programs and support. Second, while women are not responsible for the armed conflict that has reduced their communities to refugee status, we bear the brunt of keeping the families and communities together. So much responsibility is laid on the shoulders of women and yet women are not heard but only seen. When seen, women are relegated to a minor sector, together with children and youth, as if to say that we are intrinsically powerless. No more.

In the areas of conflict, as we search for peace as equal partners, Muslim women are dealing with obstacles from within our own communities. Muslim women in the Philippines have become more vocal, demanding that Muslim leaders treat us as partners in the struggle for freedom, for dignity, for a better way of life. As many of the speakers today have stressed, when Islam arrived, women rose from the level of possession to one of equality. Islam gave women rights.

By grounding human and women's rights in Islamic cultural traditions and religious teachings, we hope that our own local religious leaders will accept our advocacies and not see these as unwelcome secular ideas. We need to refocus attention on the principles of *Hurriya* (liberty), *Adl* (justice), *Shura* (consultation) and apply these to both men and women. We need to encourage Ijtihad where the scholars like you would open up the discourse among all Muslims in which informed critical reasoning and cultural mediation can take place.

We need to exert sustained pressure on our governments and on our own Muslim leaders to allow more freedom, because it is in their own interest and that of their constituents, as well as in the interest of peace and stability in the world. Repression, in the guise of a war on terrorism or in the guise of *jihad*, must not be allowed to silence all opposition. Those who advocate violent extremism are the enemies of mankind and of Islam, and must be stopped before they bring havoc and mayhem to their own countries and to the world. However, real and genuine reforms are needed. Progressive, liberal or moderate voices cannot be heard in an environment of fear and repression.

### **DEMOCRATIZATION RATHER THAN GLOBAL WAR**

There is a real and present danger for radicalization of Muslim communities in Southeast Asia as well in the rest of the Islamic world, especially in the context of their marginalization and unaddressed grievances. How to best neutralize violent extremism? If there is only one answer to this question I think it is genuine democratization. A meaningful democracy can easily address the roots of terrorism. It is said that the hand

that rocks the cradle, rocks the world. If this is true, and if we truly care for the democratization of our communities, we must start with the women. In many ways, the role of women in our communities is the litmus test for stable, democratic, just societies. And stable, democratic, just societies can best deal with extremism.

There is a prevailing misconception that democracy is Western and therefore might be used as tool for colonization. Hence, the perception that democracy and Islam are incompatible should be continuously discussed, if not resolved. It is critical to show that Islam can be a source of democratic values, and this can be done through an intra-Islamic conference that should include elites and masses, as well as moderates and extremists, in our Muslim communities – as CSID is doing.

Furthermore, there is a need to be sensitive to the diverse historical and cultural contexts of Muslim communities. While democracy and Islam may be compatible, the kind of democracy for Muslims in SEA or in Iraq should be specific to the needs and aspirations of the Islamic communities concerned. Cultural practices must also be distinguished from Islam as a religion.

To promote peace and strengthen the voices of the silent majority, we need to reinforce civil society, respect for civilian authority, respect for the rights of all members of our communities – men and women. We need to fight for our human rights, women's rights.

To promote peace and strengthen democracy, it is important to recognize the need to empower women in Muslim communities while maintaining their Muslim identity, to

provide them access to both political and economic power, to address the injustices not just committed by government but also by Muslims in power, to revisit the codification of the Shari'a to ensure equality for all.

We need to emphasize that the struggle for democracy must be a collaboration between and among Muslims and non-Muslims, minority or majority groups, who are all advocates of the politics of inclusion and living in open societies.

Helping the progressives, the Liberals, the moderates gain the upper hand in their contest with the Islamists for Muslim hearts and minds may well be the most important policy objective, not just in Southeast Asia, but elsewhere as well. Central to this task is to create a strong international network to unite the fractured voices of moderate Muslims. The creation of this network can provide moderates with a platform for their message and amplify their voices. Southeast Asia is unique in the Muslim world in that there is already in place a dense structure of moderate Muslim institutions. Such institutions can be instrumental in developing and disseminating a moderate narrative that contradicts the radical narrative.

Perhaps, in this respect, we in the periphery called Southeast Asia have much to share with our brothers and sisters in the heartland. Perhaps, our experiences in democratization and pluralism can be helpful in the transformation of Islamic communities.

In conclusion, a reminder for my sisters: Not only must we Muslim women engage the state elites, dominated by men wishing to retain the power that they currently enjoy; we must stand firm against the predominating patriarchal cultural values that continually oppress us. We must fight our exclusion from the political and economic systems.

Sura 49, Verse 13 of the Holy Koran states: "O mankind! We created you from a single pair of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other, not that ye may despise each other." Not only are we Muslims enjoined to be part of a pluralistic society, but Muslim men and women are recognized equally as father and mother of all nations. Thus, Muslim men and women are recognized equally as members of society.

We women must join the war for this is a war for our hearts and minds, to defend our space here on earth. We must therefore fight with our hearts and minds. We Muslim women must not allow ourselves to be silenced.