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First Ladies want bigger role for women

THE wives of heads of State and government attending the First Ladies' dialogue have called on OIC member countries to initiate steps to secure peace and provide opportunities for women to partake of the development of the ummah.

To better address problems facing women in Muslim countries, they proposed the setting up of a secretariat to oversee the matter under Malaysia's chairmanship of the OIC.

Calling for a permanent OIC women's forum in future summits, the First Ladies Dialogue issued a 10-point resolution which will be passed to OIC chairman Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad for consideration and action.

The resolution, among others, called for the development of institutional structures, mechanisms and policies with the highest level of commitment and budgetary allocation within its secretariat and members for the advancement of Muslim women and also the ummah as a whole.

Dialogue chairman, Malaysia's First Lady Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali said, despite being integral in the development of the nations, many social and cultural practices and the misinterpretation of Islamic principles operated as obstacles which limited women's choice to participate in the democratic process.

This, she added, had also caused them to be denied access to health, education and economic resources.

"Whilst the Quran advocates equality between men and women, there are Muslim countries which misinterpret Islamic principles to oppress and deny women their rights."

Dr Siti Hasmah said Muslim States should establish institutional mechanisms that fostered gender equality by assessing the impact of policies and programmes on both men and women.

"They should take action to reduce or eliminate social and cultural obstacles that work against women to ensure equitable distribution of wealth.

"Women have a big role to play. Not only can we articulate our views on equality in Islam, development and peace on both the national and international stages, we can also actively participate in these efforts."

She added that richer Muslim nations should help provide poorer countries with aid and access to markets to help them escape the poverty trap.

"For Islamic States' industrial expansion to take off, there must be a critical mass of capable workforce ... since women constitute 50 per cent of the population in most countries, they must be brought into the mainstream of sustainable development and in the pursuit of lasting peace and equity."

In presenting the resolution, Dr Siti Hasmah also said while Islamic states spent fortunes on their military budgets but still succumb to preemptive and unilateral strikes, they should focus more on investing extensively in education, particularly science and technology.

"Quality education and the creative use of knowledge for socio-economic development are the true wealth of a nation," she said at the dialogue held in conjunction with the 10th OIC Summit.

Speaking to reporters after the brainstorming session of the dialogue themed "Women: Peace and Development", Dr Siti Hasmah said it was

important that members develop stronger unity to enable them to mobilise their collective capacity to address and solve pressing problems.

Urging Islamic countries to reflect deeply to identify the root causes of the problems besetting the ummah, she said being part of a globalised world, they should strive to catch up with the demands of the knowledge economy and society.

The First Ladies also called on OIC member countries to focus on the improvement of women's and children's health and reduce maternal and under-five mortality.

The resolution called for increased investments in science and technology and the enhancement of efforts to prevent and control the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Other First Ladies who participated in the dialogue were spouses of Presidents of Gabon (Edith Lucie Bongo), Gambia (Zineb Yahya Jameh), Pakistan (Sehba Musharraf), Sudan (Widad Babikir Omer) and Turkey (Semra Sezer).

Also present were wives of Foreign Ministers and ambassadors, in addition to experts in several fields and representatives of non-governmental organisations. The dialogue was organised by the Women and Family Development Ministry.

Dr Siti Hasmah expressed optimism that the inaugural dialogue could identify and address the root causes of the Muslim women's backwardness and serve as starting block for their advancement.

Wife of Pakistan President Sehba Musharraf said the recommendations made to the organisation were solid enough to help Muslim women progress.

"If they are well implemented it could be a milestone for women's development as women have been long neglected in social, political and economic development in Muslim countries."

Edith Lucie Bongo, wife of Gabon President, pushed for the adoption of the resolution in OIC's agenda. She said as women are not a minority group and representing half of the world's population, their voice, potential, creativity and energy could not be overlooked.

Underlining women's crucial participation for sustainable human development, she said women's productive role would only "enhance their status and eliminate any gender-based based discrimination in the distribution of resources".

Sudan's First Lady, in expressing her amazement of Malaysia's progress, said the country had a lot to learn from the OIC chair's experience in ensuring women in the country are empowered.

Also calling for the focus of women empowerment, she added the effectiveness of the resolution would only be materialised if leaders of Muslim governments are responsive to their voice.

Fatimah Hashimi Rafsanjani, daughter of former President of Iran, who first mooted the idea of having a dialogue in OIC to address women issues to Dr Mahathir in the last OIC Summit said: "If Muslim Governments do not implement these principles, the West will want to push their experiences and values which will not be useful to us."