

27/10/2003

A 'heavier' agenda perhaps?

Ruslina Yusoff

THE 10th OIC Summit ended on a positive note.

For the women, the First Ladies Dialogue on 'Women, Peace, and Development' chaired by Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali during the summit and the 10-point resolutions submitted to the main OIC committee were an achievement.

It marks a milestone for women. That women need to take steps to improve their lives is not a new issue. It had dominated talks by local women and when Fatima Hashemi Rafsanjani suggested to the Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, of having a permanent agenda for women in the summit, it was the only logical step to take.

Hats off to the Ministry for Women and Family Development for initiating this dialogue. It was time well spent. The resolutions drawn up clearly indicated that the First Ladies have a role to play in nation building. By virtue of their positions, they certainly can do a lot to help women in their countries, to bring them into the mainstream of sustainable development and in the pursuit of lasting peace and equity.

Women's contributions in national economic and social development have always been recognised. In the history of Islam, women had fought alongside Prophet Muhammad in war and his wife Saidatina Khadijah was herself a successful businesswoman.

Helping women was very much on the minds of the First Ladies. Though it was difficult to get close to or talk to the First Ladies during our brief conversations with some of them, they indicated that they wanted to visit orphanages and institutions which help women to be economically independent, and were interested in briefings on programmes that help combat social ills.

It would have been meaningful if more such programmes were included. Going by the itinerary drawn up for them, it was one big yawn, and didn't do justice to the First Ladies who happen to be professionals. The First Lady of Gabon, for instance, is a paediatrician and she has a personal interest in HIV programmes.

It appears that the First Ladies had nothing better to do than endless shopping and sightseeing.

Why weren't social programmes included? Why wasn't the secretariat in charge of the spouses programmes more creative? Didn't the secretariat seek input from local professional women or check out the background of the First Ladies?

Whilst the heads of governments sorted things out at the macro level, the First Ladies were the best people to help bring about changes for their own kind. Their spouses could help translate the resolutions (derived from the dialogue) into policies. One could hardly expect them to make another trip solely to discuss women's issues.

The secretariat badly needs to update itself on how to be media savvy. Judging by the verbal abuses hurled at the media group at some juncture, it looks like the secretariat might need to change their haughty attitude.

They should understand that the local media is assisting them. So it doesn't pay to be rude or arrogant. Don't make the media feel that they (the secretariat) are doing them a favour.

Officials of the Putrajaya Mosque should also drop their double standards. They kept insisting the media wore the jubah and scarf before entering the mosque but the spouses of heads of governments and foreign

ministries were allowed in with their shoes on, minus the jubah and scarf!