

20/10/2003

Setting things right for women

Sofianni Subki

THREE years ago, at the ninth Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) Summit held in Qatar, Fatimah Hashemi Rafsanjani approached Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad with an idea.

As Malaysia was the next country to host the OIC, the daughter of Iran's former president, Hashemi Rafsanjani, requested that women's issues be incorporated in OIC's next agenda. Dr Mahathir promised to look into it.

She was gratified that he kept his word and the inaugural First Ladies Dialogue took place last week, in conjunction with the 10th OIC Summit 2003 held in Kuala Lumpur.

"The problems of Muslim women must be solved by Muslim women themselves," said Fatimah, who was in town to attend the dialogue. "This is why Islamic countries must meet up. It's also important that women be given a separate forum to discuss issues; our problems are different from men's."

Led by Malaysia's First Lady Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Ali, the dialogue saw participation of first ladies from four countries - Pakistan, Gabon, Sudan and Turkey. Wives of ministers and officials from other OIC countries like Uganda, Sri Lanka, Benin, Mozambique and Cote D'Ivoire took part too.

In her keynote address, Dr Siti Hasmah highlighted the bleak situation in many OIC countries today. Compared to developing countries, the people of OIC member states have a shorter life expectancy, more undernourished children and higher maternal and infant mortality rates.

They are behind the rest of the world in terms of scientific and technological capabilities. Many are ravaged by war, violence and terrorism. Many are also characterised by male-dominated societies in which women are prevented from taking an active role in society.

She added that the survival of OIC member states depends on whether they are able to find dramatically different ways of doing things. This includes putting an end to conflict, promoting gender equality and making the radical change of applying ICT and computer technology to industry, enterprise and government.

In addition, military budgets must be reduced so that money is spent on education instead. This is crucial if the Muslim world wants to get ahead in the field of science and technology.

Prior to the keynote address, Datuk Seri Shahrizat Jalil, Minister of Women and Family Development gave a speech in which she said the time has come for first ladies, being women of great influence, to speak out against the destruction and devastation of war.

"This meeting provides an opportunity for first ladies of OIC countries to deliberate on the subject of peace and development, two issues which are important for all women of the world, especially Muslim women, in facing the challenges of a globalised world."

Once all those in attendance broke up into groups, this was exactly what they did. Across the designated tables, introductions were made and views were exchanged. To help get the ball rolling, 10 resource persons were on hand to broach certain issues that the Ministry of Women and Family Development had identified as relevant and necessary.

One of them was Datuk Professor Nik Safiah Karim, who talked about women's participation in the community. She, along with other Malaysian women seated at her table, shared their thoughts on a wide range of issues

with representatives from Brunei and Pakistan.

"On women's rights, we agreed that it all boils down to education," said Nik Safiah. "Education is necessary for women to achieve their rightful place in society. We also talked about the lack of participation of women in politics as well as wrong interpretations of Islamic teachings that have given women less rights."

Datuk Dr Norraesah Mohamed, another resource person, spoke on eradicating poverty and economic development. Sitting with representatives from Gabon, Turkey and Cote D'Ivoire, she said that their discussion covered the different levels of poverty in OIC countries.

"One way of eradicating poverty is to get women involved in economic activities. Also, education is the equaliser; it is the bridge between a low economic status and a much higher one."

Following the hour-long dialogue, 10 resolutions were drawn up and adopted. Among them were for OIC member states to institute public policies and institutional support for women. Emphasis on education and women's health was also called for. Prevention and control of HIV/AIDS was another important step towards securing peace.

Describing the resolutions as useful, the First Lady of Sudan, Widad Babikar Omer, said the First Ladies Dialogue was a commendable effort as it worked towards improving women's status in Islamic nations. "Now that the war (in Iraq) is over, one of the pressing issues in Sudan is women and education," she said.

Sehba Musharraf, the first lady of Pakistan, said that Islam is a religion that believes in family values and women are the linchpin of every family. By looking after women, as well as promoting and helping them out, the nation as a whole improves.

"Women are a marginalised community, even in our part of the world. I hope that some initiatives will be implemented; this is essential."

The First Lady of Gabon, Edith Lucie Bongo, expressed hope that the resolutions drawn up at the First Ladies Dialogue will be seriously considered by the main committee of OIC.

"I hope solidarity among the OIC member states will strengthen over time. More will be accomplished if more work is done and less energy, time and money wasted. I also hope to see women, which make up half of the world's population, have their rightful place in society."

* The writer can be contacted at sofianni@nstp.com.my