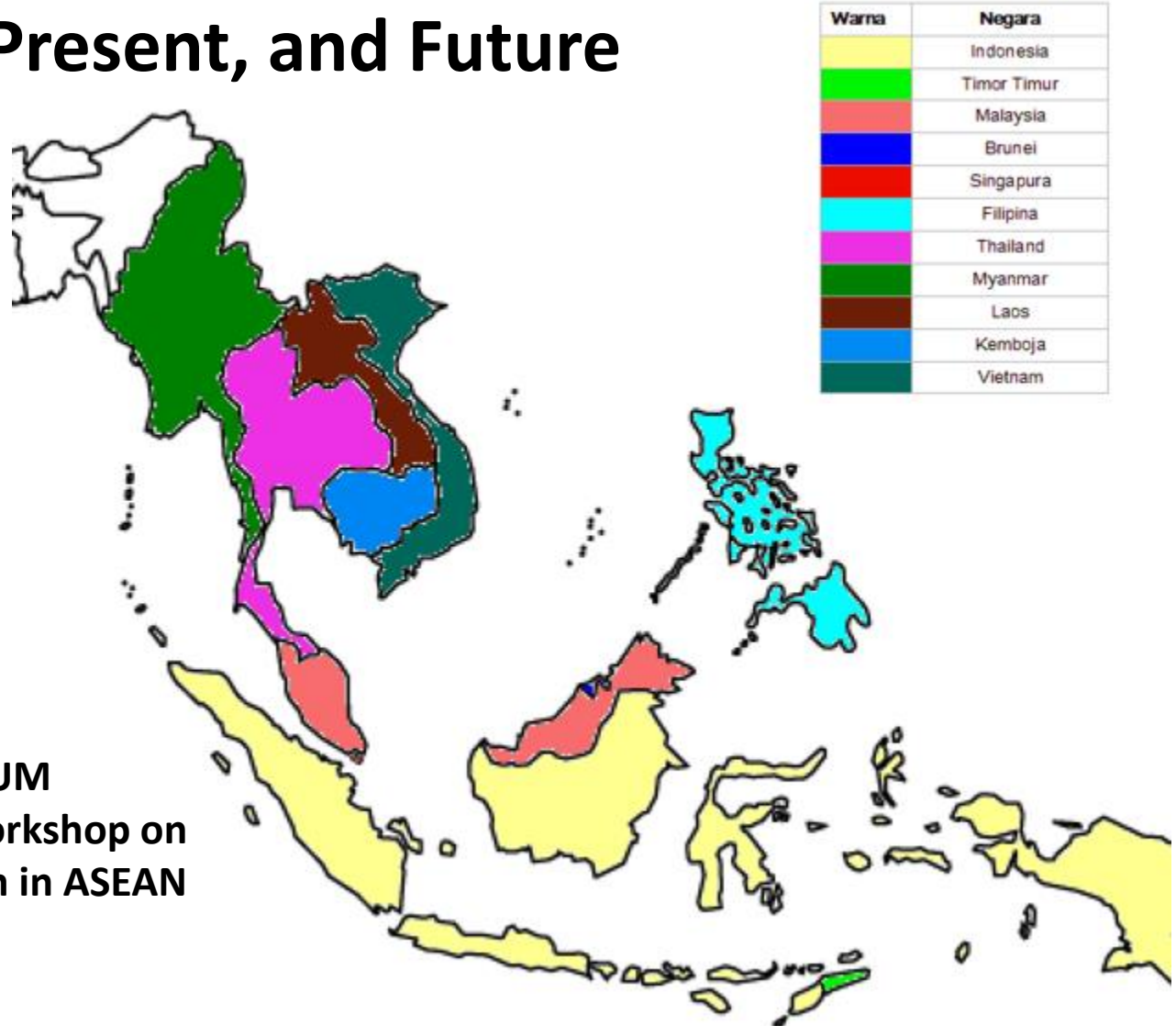


Islam and Muslim Women in Southeast Asia: Past, Present, and Future



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Organisation of presentation

- Introduction
- Characteristics of a Qur'anic society which affect Muslim women
- SEA Muslim women in history and today
- Major issues & challenges Muslim women have to contend with.
- The future???

Introduction: Images of Muslim women portrayed in media



Oppressed?? Second class citizens?? Gloomy??

Muslim women seldom portrayed



Bright, confident,
colourful, intelligent



Is the allegation fair?

- What is it about a Muslim, Middle Eastern woman that evokes such strong negative responses in the West? After all the West is a patriarchal society, too, sanctioned by the same monotheistic belief in God the Father as Judaism and Islam, the other two Abrahamic religions. . . But in any Western discussion of women's condition around the world, Islam always implies a worst case scenario. Curiously, the same stereotypes are not found in Western representations of Hindu women whose official legal status falls far below that of Muslim women. When a Hindu woman marries, for instance, she is formally detached from her own family and officially becomes part of her husband's family. This means that if her husband dies, the wife has no place to go. [\[1\]](#)

[\[1\]](#) Elizabeth W. Fernea, Islamic Feminism finds a different voice, American Foreign Service Association, 2000.
<http://www.afsa.org/fsj/may00/fernea.html>.

Islam is not monolithic

- The social and political situations as well as women's position in Muslim world vary widely from country to country. While in Saudi Arabia Muslim women are fighting for the right to drive cars, in Egypt or Yemen they are fighting against FGM (female genital mutilation), in Pakistan it is against honor killing and in Bangladesh it is against eve-teasing or dowry
- Syeda Sultana Razia, PhD , observations during the Conference on Change in Muslim Societies and Role of women on 23-24 December, 2011, Istanbul Turkey

Basic characteristics of a Qur'anic society which particularly affect women

- 1. Equal status and worth of the sexes**, although their equal importance does not substantiate a claim for their equivalence or perfect identity.

Equality in

(a) religious matters as the origins of humanity, or to religious obligations and rewards;

(b) Ethical Obligations and Rewards

the same ethical obligations and rewards for women and men.

“And who so does good works, whether male or female, and he (or she) is a believer, such will enter Paradise and they will not be wronged the dint in a date-stone.” (4:124)

Cont..

(c) Education except for reason of safety & security

(d) Legal rights

the Qur'an proclaims the right of every woman to buy and sell, to contract and to earn, and to hold and manage her own money and property. In addition to these rights, the Qur'an grants woman a share in the inheritance of the family (4:7-11), warns against depriving her of that inheritance (4:19), specifies that the dower (mahr) of her marriage should belong to her alone and never be taken by her husband (2:229; 4:19-21,25) unless offered by the woman as a free gift (4:44).

2. Dual sex society

- The society based on the Qur'an is a dual-sex society -both sexes are assigned their special responsibilities. This assures the healthy functioning of the society for the benefit of all its members.
- This division of labour imposes on men more economic responsibilities (2:233, 240-241; 4:34), while women are expected to play their role in childbearing and rearing (2:233; 7:189).
- The Qur'an alleviates the greater economic demands made on male members of the population by allotting them a larger share than women in inheritance. At the same time it grants women the right to maintenance in exchange for her contribution to the physical and emotional well being of the family and to the care she provides in the rearing of children

3. Interdependence of members of society

- Allah, in the Holy Qur'an, stipulated the reciprocal or mutual duties and obligations of the various members of the family-men and women, fathers and mothers, children and elders, and relatives of all degrees (17:23-26; 4:1, 7-12; 2:177; 8:41; 16:90; etc.). The care of and concern for other members of society is equally a duty of the Muslim.
- The Qur'an thereby instills in the Muslim a sense of a place within, and responsibility to society.

4. The extended family

The extended family solidarity is prescribed and strengthened by the Holy Qur'an, where we find repeated references to the rights of kin (17:23-26; 4:7-9; 8:41; 24:22; etc.) and the importance of treating them with kindness (2 :83; 16: 90; etc.). Inheritance portions, for not only the nuclear family members but those of the extended family as well, are specifically prescribed (2:180-182; 4:33,176). Dire punishment is threatened for those who ignore these measures for intra-family support (4:7-12). The extended family of Islamic culture is thus not merely a product of social conditions, it is an institution anchored in the word of God Himself and buttressed by Qur'anic advice and rules.

5. Patriarchal society

Contrary to the goals of the Women's Liberation movement, the Qur'an calls for a society which assigns the ultimate leadership and decision-making role in the family to men - most senior male member of the family. It is this patriarchal assignment of power and responsibility which is meant by such expressions as "*wa lil rijali 'alathinna darajatun* " (2:228), and "*al-rijalu qawwamuna 'ala al-nisa'i....* " (4:34).

These passages do not mean the subjugation of women to men in a gender-based dictatorship. Such an interpretation shows a blatant disregard of the Qur'an's repeated calls for the equality of the sexes and for its command to show respect and kindness to women. The passages in question point instead to a means for avoiding internal dissension and indecision for the benefit of all family members. They advocate for a patriarchal society.

Why patriarchal & not matriarchal?

- *Qawwamun* is derived, does not imply despotic overlordship. Instead, the term refers to the one who stands up (from *qama*, "to stand") for another in a protective and benevolent way.
- Men are in charge of women, because Allah has made the one of them to excel the other, and because they spend of their property (for the support of women)....(4:34)
- Physical and economic contributions and responsibility are, therefore, the Qur'anic reasons for proposing a patriarchal rather than a matriarchal society.

Rights of Muslim women

- Social rights – right to a good name, to education; choice of spouse; retaining her last name after marriage; right to breastfeed or otherwise; right to end marriage; polygamy.
- Economic rights – right to work (but priority is her family because the duty of her husband to provide for livelihood); her properties and earnings are hers; right of inheritance;
- Political rights – to exercise her right to vote and to run for office.
- The Muslim code of dress – honor & integrity.
- Muslim female – protected in every stage of her life incl motherhood.

Four roles of a Muslim woman

- It is one of family care and home keeping (In her husband's home, the woman is the shepherdess held responsible for her flock).
- It is one of worship (Qur'an 33:31)
- It is one of imparting knowledge (and recite what is rehearsed to you in your homes, of the Signs of God and His Wisdom . . . Qur'an 33: 34)
- It is one of female social guidance (the believers, men and women are protectors, one of another; they enjoin what is just and forbid what is evil. . . (Qur'an 9:71)

Glimpse of Muslim women in History

- Mernissi (1987) argues that in the history of Islam, there have been women who possessed political and military power (Acheh) – a situation unthinkable in the West.

“The vast and inspiring records of Muslim history so brilliantly completed for us by scholars such as Ibn Hisham, Ibn Hajar, Ibn Sa’ad, and Tabari speak to the contrary. We Muslim women can walk into the modern world with pride, knowing that the quest for dignity, democracy and human rights, for full participation in the political and social affairs of our country, stems from **no imported Western values**, but is a **true** part of the Muslim tradition”.[\[1\]](#)

[\[1\]](#) Fatima Mernissi, *The veil and the male elite: a Feminist Interpretation of Women’s Rights in Islam* tran. Mary Jo Lakeland (Cambridge, Ma: Perseus Books, 1987), p.viii.

SEA Muslim women in history

- Before colonialism (after advent of Islam) – traditional subsistence living.
- Women – traditional roles as mothers and help in farming and cultivation, consistent with the Islamic spirit on the nature and role of women, where men are breadwinners and the protectors of the women.
- Learning were only at home for the women. The women were totally dependent on their men for their living. Marriage partners were determined by parents without having to consult them. Polygamy was an accepted practice but only among the religious scholars and the aristocrats

During colonial period

- During colonialism – traditional subsistence living. By 18th century commercial trading and business – tin mines, rubber plantation, coffee plantation, transportation industry, spices.
- Womenfolk – still traditional roles consistent with the Islamic spirit. Girls education, basic primary education. Later, the women also took a deep interest in political movements which struggled for independence eg. Wanita UMNO and Muslimat PAS in Malaysia.
- In general women were not treated equally in education and also in choice of marriage partners. Classic case highlighting inequality – Shaykh Ahmad Al-Hadi's novel Faridah Hanum

After Independence

- After independence – national economic development. Educational opportunity for women widen till later it strove for democratization of education in accord with the policy of world organization such as UNESCO.
- Womenfolk – introduction of mass labour and women esp unmarried young ladies begin to leave home and work in the factories for the sake of econ devt.
- Educational opportunity widen with women given secondary and tertiary education. Almost equal opportunity – truly a revolution!. However, when there is poverty and parents need to make a choice, the priority will be given to the sons who are supposed to be the family breadwinners in Islam.

Contemporary period

- Today, Muslim women in most countries in SEA are treated equally by parents in regard to getting an education, job opportunity and choice of partners.
- With more education and job opportunity (and in some instances the influence of Western feminists), Muslim women everywhere begin to question some of the deep-seated Islamic practices in their societies such as polygamy, arranged marriage, inequality in legal inheritance and certain posts in society such as the post of Qadhi which has been limited to men, right to divorce, rights in marriage.
- Some have also endorsed CEDAW for equality of women in all respects.

Major issues and challenges

- Juggling between role in family and career. Muslim women need to be 'superwomen'. Hence, a new trend of 'buying' dinner, or outsourcing domestic chores to maids.
- Family law with respect to divorce, polygamy, inheritance, etc. Perceived to be not 'fair'.
- Child marriage
- Freedom to choose who to marry
- Women still regarded as inferior to men intellectually and therefore not allowed for positions of leadership (political & professional)
- Maintaining their religious identity as Muslim women who dress in modesty and Islamic code of dressing.
- Muslim feminists eg SIS & Musawwah who advocate equality in all respects and support CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women).

The Muslim feminists' struggle

- Muslim women reformist or feminist in general have not stepped against Islamic religious principles. They do not question the laws in the Qur'an and the sunnah. What they question is man's interpretation of the Qur'an which they felt was more in favour of the man and do not do justice to the women, are greatly influenced by the custom and local cultures. They also question the implementation of the law esp related to marriage and divorce which does not bear the spirit of helping the weaker sex and children. They question the ease of having polygamy and the tightness of divorce law to the extent that women are harmed. So their struggles are based on Islam. Only that some of these women groups were excessive for eg in their opposition to polygamy that they created the animosity with men and also isolated themselves from the mainstream.

Musawah's declaration

- Musawah declares that equality in the family is necessary because many aspects of our family laws fail to fulfil the *Shari'ah* requirement of justice, and do not respond to the lives and experiences of Muslim families. Even laws that are more equitable are under threat. **There cannot be equality in society without equality in the family.**
- CEDAW)—which stands for justice and equality for women in the family and society—are more in line with the *Shari'ah* than family law provisions in many Muslim countries and communities

(www.musawah.org)

What musawah advocates

- The family as a place of security, harmony, support and personal growth for all its members;
- Marriage as a partnership of equals, with mutual respect, affection, communication and decision-making authority between the partners;
- The equal right to choose a spouse or choose not to marry, and to enter into marriage only with free and full consent; and the equal right to dissolve the marriage, as well as equal rights upon its dissolution;
- Equal rights and responsibilities with respect to property, including acquisition, ownership, enjoyment, management, administration, disposition and inheritance, bearing in mind the need to ensure the financial security of all members of the family; and
- Equal rights and responsibilities of parents in matters relating to their children.

Misconception of Muslim men

Any man who believes that a Muslim woman who fights for her dignity and right to citizenship excludes herself necessarily from the umma and is a brainwashed victim of Western propaganda, is a man who misunderstands his own religious heritage, his own cultural identity. (Mernissi, 1987)

Indonesia: Religion and identity

- Lugina Setyawati in Bianca (2008) asserts that in Riau where unlike other regions, religion has become fused with the Malay ethnic identity. This identity has been strengthened by the current resurgence of regionalism and she observed that women played an important role in the construction of these local identities.

Polygamy

- The way the women responded to polygamy was influenced by their beliefs in Islam and the attitudes of the people who lived around them. One who believes that it is a form of a test of their beliefs in Islam, tended to stay in the marriage as a sign of religious devotion and for the sake of her children. Those who lived in society that does not have negative attitudes about polygamy will find less social pressure to accept polygamy (Nirmala in Bianca, 2008).

Hijab / head covering

Women (of the rural area) feel that the head covering is not expected to be a part of a costume contest or a social trend. Its practice carries a consequence for the individuals who adopt the practice. They were able to read that these *sinetron* (drama in TV) were economically rather than religiously-motivated and producers were making use of them to present fashionable Muslim dress (*busana*) to whet the appetite of trendy Muslimahs (Rachmah Ida in Bianca, 2008).

Religious space

- Muslim women negotiated for religious space as in the case of the Nasyiatul Aisyiyah, that is the young women's organization in the Muhammadiyah whose leaders championed new ideas about women and Islam. Muslim women from secular feminism and Arabic influenced Islamism struggle to strike a middle path (Siti Syamsiatun in Bianca, 2008).

Muslim Women in Malaysia

Unlike Muslim women in other parts of the world – Middle East or Indo-Pakistan subcontinent, Malaysian women have been recognized as partners in family and national development.

Historically, Malay women played a major role in agriculture. Heather Strange in her study of Malay women in Terengganu has found that 91 percent of women were involved in agricultural activities and did not confine themselves in the house. They also have their own income, but they still respect their husband as the leader of the household

(Zaleha K & Raihanah A (2007)., Women Emancipation in the 21 st Century: Islam as the Model of Struggle)

Women & Politics



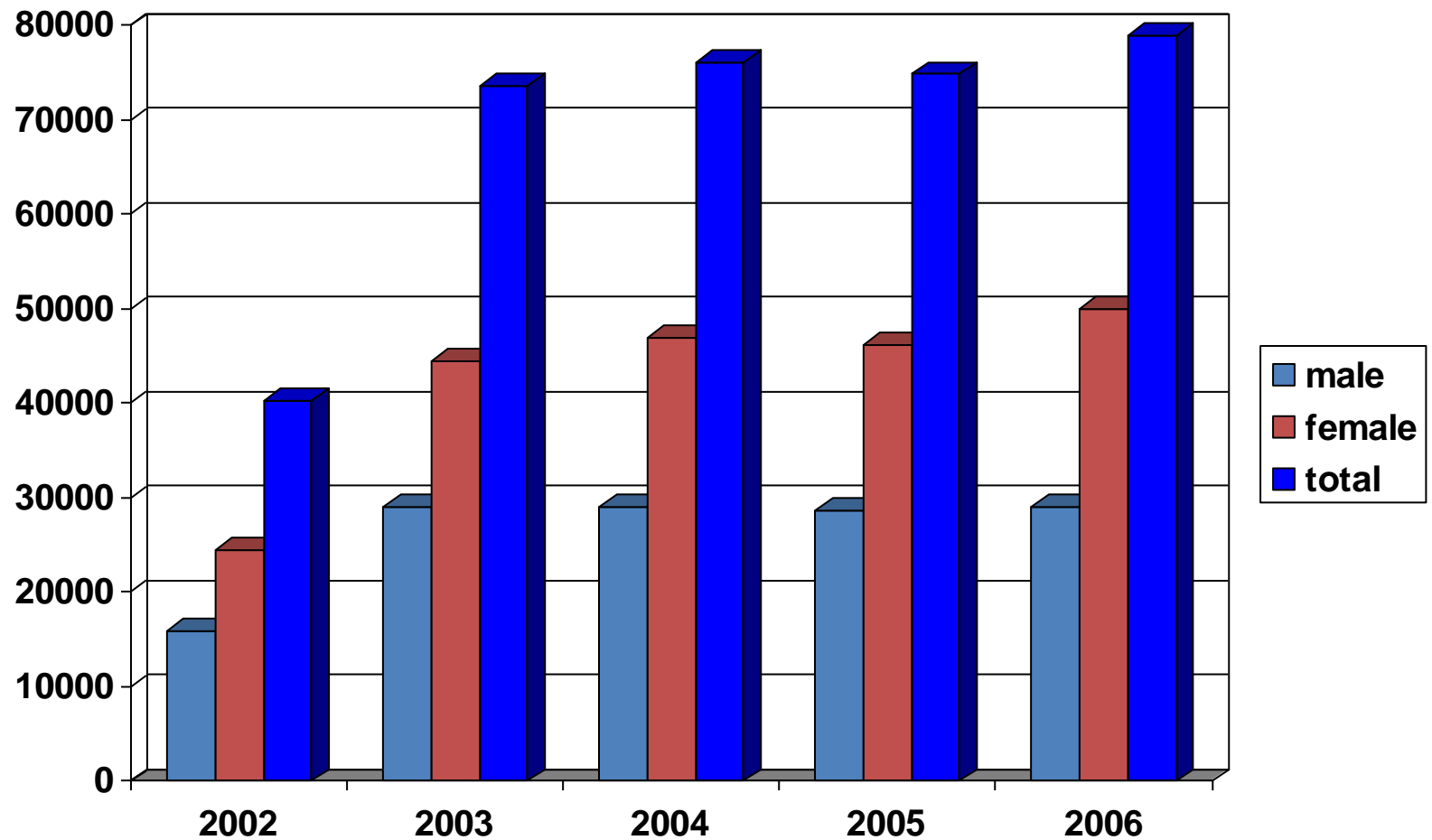
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Muslim

Enrolment in Public Universities 2000-2005

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
<i>No of Universities</i>	11	14	15	17	17	18
Male	92,639	103,747	116,591	110,645	116,799	121,157
Female	118,945	142,242	166,615	172,594	179,412	191,008
Total	211,584	245,989	283,206	283,239	296,211	312,165
% Female (over total)	56.2	57.8	58.8	60.9	60.6	61.2

University Graduates by Sex in 2002-06



Number of Registered Professionals by Sex 2006

Profession	Total	Male	Female	Female (% of total)
<i>Accountants</i>	22,460	12,578	9,882	44.0
<i>Professional Architects</i>	1,621	1,389	232	14.3
<i>Architects</i>	1,271	925	346	27.2
<i>Professional Engineers</i>	12,598	12,245	353	2.8
<i>Graduate Engineers</i>	40,608	34,728	5,880	14.5
<i>Dentists</i>	2,841	1,244	1,597	56.2
<i>Veterinary Surgeons</i>	1,462	960	502	34.3
<i>Medical Doctors</i>	15,574	9,775	5,799	37.2
<i>Land Surveyors</i>	423	422	1	0.2
<i>Quantity Surveyors</i>	1,408	931	477	33.9
<i>Lawyers</i>	12,229	6,639	5,590	45.7

A European View

- I think it is great to see that people of different races and religions can live together as they do in Malaysia. Maybe there is some tension but we didn't feel that when we were visiting. It seemed like the Malays, Indians, Chinese etc were able to live side by side without major problems and I think that is an example to follow. I have to admit that I was a bit intimidated to see women all covered up when we went to Dubai a few years back. The Malay women also cover their hair but in most cases they don't cover the entire body. The head pieces are often in bright colors.

(http://gardkarlsen.com/malaysia_kuala_lumpur.htm)



Muslim women in minority countries

- Preservation of religious identity – prayer, mosque, education, and attire
- Islam in public space is limited.
- Misunderstanding of Islam
- Islamophobia – terrorism, jihad, women secluded and oppressed
- Unfriendly media

The future

- More spaces for Muslimah in SEA to actualize their potentials. Indonesian women began to fill these spaces post-Suharto
- More highly educated Muslim women – enable more deliberation and consultation on family and women matters. Insha'Allah treated in the spirit of Qur'an & Sunnah.
- Creation of female judges in the shari'ah courts to facilitate above.
- Women continue to be strong partners in nation building
- Ulama & qadhi & Muslim men in general will be more sensitive to the 'other' perspective in interpretation of the law.

The prophet's farewell sermon

- O People, it is true that **you have certain rights with regard to your women, but they also have rights over you. Remember that you have taken them as your wives only under Allah's trust and with His permission.** If they abide by your right, then to them belongs the right to be fed and clothed in kindness. **Do treat your women well and be kind to them for they are your partners and committed helpers.** And it is your right that they do not make friends with any one of whom you do not approve, as well as never to be unchaste.

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