‘The essence of Islam is peace, justice, and compassion and the work of Sisters in Islam is a truly consistent, courageous and magnificent manifestation of that essence.’

Anwar Fazal
Recipient of the Right Livelihood Award, popularly known as the ‘Alternative’ Nobel Prize.
It began with a question: If God is just—if Islam is just—why do laws and policies made in the name of Islam create injustice? This was the burning question faced by the founding members of Sisters In Islam (SIS) when they began their search for solutions to the problem of discrimination against Muslim women in the name of Islam.

The group first assembled in 1987 within the Association of Women Lawyers (AWL) when several women lawyers and their friends came together under the Association’s Syariah subcommittee to study problems associated with the implementation of new Islamic Family Laws that had been legislated in 1984, and enforced in 1987. The group was composed of lawyers, academics, journalists, analysts, and activists, and many women had confided in them their marital problems and the difficulties they faced when seeking legal redress from religious authorities. These early meetings focused on problems with the law and its implementation, and the solutions needed to remedy shortcomings within the system.

The group held its first meetings in the living room of a house shared by Zainah Anwar, a former journalist and senior analyst, and Noor Farida Ariffin, then President of AWL and Legal Advisor to the Economic Planning Unit in the Prime Minister’s Department.

The group’s first initiative was to organise a workshop in 1988 involving the National Council of Women’s Organisations, the Federal Government’s Women’s Affairs Division, and the Islamic Centre (Pusat Islam) of the Prime Minister’s Department. The workshop sought to alert the authorities to the problems women faced with the implementation of the new Family Laws, and to recommend substantive legal and procedural reform to ensure that Muslim women’s rights were upheld under the law.

Law reform, however important, was only the beginning of the journey. Many within the group felt that dealing with the law alone was insufficient, especially in view of the fact that Islam was being increasingly referred to as a source of injustice and oppression. Women complained that they suffered in silence. They believed that Islam demanded their complete obedience to husbands, even when the men deserved no such consideration. They were told repeatedly in religious lectures and sermons—at private homes, over radio and television, at mosques and in the courts—that men were superior to women, that the evidence of two women equalled that of one man; that the husband had the right to beat his wife or to take a second wife; and that the only place for a disobedient wife in the hereafter was hell.

The nature of these early meetings thus began to change: some within the group felt the urgent need to re-read the Qur’an to discover if the Text truly supported the oppression and ill-treatment of women. The need for Textual considerations was urgent, for women’s groups that had been urging the Government to make domestic violence a crime now faced the problem of dealing separately with how the law applied to Muslims. For example, the Joint Action Group against Violence Against Women (JAG), formed in 1985, had encountered opposition from representatives of Pusat Islam who asserted that domestic violence laws could not apply to Muslims at all. A Muslim man, they claimed, had the divine right to beat his wife, and no human law could deny him that right.

Those supporting the rights of men sought justification for their views in the Qur’anic verse on nushuz, commonly interpreted as ‘disobedience’. As stated in Surah An-Nisa, 4:34:

‘... As for those from whom you fear nushuz, admonish them, then banish them to beds apart and “strike” them.’ As Muslims brought up to believe in a just God and a just Islam, it was difficult for women to believe that God could sanction injustice, oppression, or violence towards them. In view of these Scriptural claims, the need to turn back to the Text had become imperative.
By this time, membership of the group had also evolved. Only three of the original group remained, while the AWL President, Noor Farida, had gone on to head the Gender Unit of the Commonwealth Secretariat in London. New members continued to meet in Zainah’s living room, and by 1989 these eight women formed the core of what was to become Sisters in Islam:

- Amina Wadud, a teacher of Qur’anic Studies at the International Islamic University who would go on to publish her pioneering work Qur’an and Women: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman’s Perspective.
- Askiah Adam, an analyst at the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia.
- Norani Othman, a sociologist at the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (the National University of Malaysia).
- Rashidah Abdullah, a senior programme officer in the gender and development programme at the Asian and Pacific Development Centre (APDC).
- Rose Ismail, a journalist at the New Straits Times.
- Sharifah Zuriah Aljeffri, a law lecturer at the International Islamic University who would go on to publish her pioneering work Qur’an and Women: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman’s Perspective.
- Amina Wadud, a teacher of Qur’anic Studies at the International Islamic University who would go on to publish her pioneering work Qur’an and Women: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman’s Perspective.

Through methodological foundations grounded in the Qur’an (‘Read’, the first word revealed to Prophet Muhammad saw), the group’s textual studies opened up a world of Islam that was based on the principles of mercy, equality, justice, and love. It became patently clear that it was not Islam that oppressed women, but male-centred interpretations of the Qur’an influenced by cultural practices and values of a patriarchal society. Throughout much of Islam’s history, the Qur’an’s permission to ‘marry up to four’—a phrase in which men see the word of God as validation of male desire and experience. For example, through its studies the group discovered that the verse on polygamy explicitly stated that ‘... if you fear you shall not be able to deal justly with women, then marry only one’. It was clear that as long as interpretation, and thus control, of the Text remained exclusively within the domain of men, focus would remain principally on the verse’s permission to ‘marry up to four’—a phrase in which men see the word of God as validation of male desire and experience. To women, however, the Text clearly addressed their fears of injustice. The right to polygamous marriage was conditional, according to the Qur’an, because the verse goes on to assert that marrying only one wife ‘... will be best for you to prevent you from doing injustice’.

Similarly, the group also found that the dominant interpretation of Verse 4:34 (as one that justified domestic violence) was inconsistent with the overall Qur’anic ethos of justice and compassion, and that there were other equally valid interpretations of 4:34 that were not premised on the permission of domestic violence.

Basis for Action

Empowered by their knowledge, the women were compelled to share their findings with the public in an effort to break the dominant belief that Islam discriminated against women. A prime opportunity arose in 1990 when, in the case of Aishah Abdul Rauf v. Wan Mohd Yusof Wan Othman, the Selangor Syariah Appeals Court decided that the husband did not have the right to take a second wife as he had not fulfilled the four conditions under Islamic Family Law that sought to ensure that justice would be done.

The judgment—and the ensuing debate on the right of men to enter polygamous relations—encouraged SIS to write letters to the editors of all the major newspapers as a strategy for an alternative voice to be heard in the public space. Searching for a name, the group chose to sign their first letters as ‘Daughters of Islam’, naming themselves after a group they met at a women’s meeting on ‘Reading the Qur’an for Ourselves’ in Karachi, Pakistan. Their letter was published the next day in the English-language daily, The Star, to immediate enthusiastic response. So groundbreaking were the group’s views that a rival English-language daily, The New Straits Times,
also sought to publish the same letter. The *New Straits Times*, however, would publish only original letters and requested that the group modify the content of the original letter and the name of the group. And so it was that in 1990, ‘Daughters of Islam’ became ‘Sisters In Islam’.

(It should be noted that the letter was also published in *Utusan Malaysia* and *Utusan Melayu*—two leading Malay-language dailies—in which SIS had used the Bahasa Malaysia version of its name, *Puteri Islam*, and continued to do so for a year until SIS discovered that another group already existed under that name.)

No Turning Back

There was no turning back for Sisters In Islam. The group continued with its intensive research into the Qur'an, *tafsir* literature, Islamic law, and women’s rights. Its research at the time focused on addressing two issues of urgent concern: equality between men and women, and domestic violence. Convinced that Islam contained a universal message of equality and justice, the group published two question-and-answer booklets: *Are Women & Men Equal Before Allah?* and *Are Muslim Men Allowed to Beat Their Wives?* The first booklet was intended to provide a basic understanding of the message of equality in the Qur'an, and how human understanding of God’s intent in a patriarchal world has led to inequality. The second booklet was part of SIS’s efforts to build a Muslim public constituency that supported the national campaign of women’s groups to make domestic violence a crime.

By 1991, the two seminal booklets on women’s rights in Islam were ready for public launch. The response was tremendous. Over 200 women and men from civil society groups, academia, the Government, and the business community attended the launch and one-day public forum. Many were heartened to hear for the first time about an Islam that publicly spoke to their own sense of fairness and justice. Strengthened by public support, SIS adopted another strategy to influence public policy: it began submitting memoranda to the Government on law reform. It sent its first memorandum in 1993 to then Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, and argued against the proposed Kelantan Syariah Criminal Code (the so-called ‘Hudud law’). The memorandum detailed
By the end of the 1990s, SIS activism expanded to include even broader non-sectarian issues such as upholding democratic principles and the fundamental liberties guaranteed by the Federal Constitution, as well as urging the observance of human rights principles and international treaties and conventions signed by the Malaysian Government. SIS then began to take public positions on freedom of religion and expression—positions of critical importance in the face of attempts to prosecute Muslims attempting to leave Islam, and efforts to silence differing opinions in Islam.

Underlying these activities was the firm belief that, as a concerned group working towards a better society, SIS could not isolate itself from the larger human rights and democratic movements in the country. A movement for gender justice must necessarily be a part of the larger human rights movement, and vice versa. The protection and expansion of the democratic space enabling a civil society to thrive—and upholding the fundamental liberties of the Malaysian Constitution—are the responsibilities of all citizens, for it is precisely these liberties that have enabled groups like SIS to exist.

For the first 11 years of its existence, the members of SIS have worked on all the group’s projects without pay, offices, or support staff. Love, passion, and emotional and financial support from family and friends sustained the eight members through their activities and publications. But as Islam and politics continued to impact on the lives of Muslims and peoples of other faiths throughout the world, the demand for SIS’s work and the voice of reason and compassion also grew steadily. By 1998, SIS finally established an office with permanent staff. Two founding members became co-directors: Zainah Anwar and Sharifah Zuriah Aljeffri.

Continuing Expansion

From a focus on research and advocacy, SIS began to expand into public education. In 2000, it began work on a training module on women’s rights in Islam and revised its original study sessions. The impetus came from the expansion of SIS membership to include younger women, many of whom were fresh graduates who had just begun their professional careers. At the same time, more and more people, Muslims and those of other faiths—both men and women—had become interested in the SIS voice for change.

These study sessions, which in the first year of the revival were open only to Muslim women, soon welcomed everyone—men and women, Muslim and those of other faiths alike. SIS also began conducting two-day training programmes on women’s rights in Islam that would reach wider audiences and build a public constituency to support the Islam of justice and equality that SIS stands for.

Further expansion took place in 2003 when SIS established its service arm: a legal clinic offering legal counselling via email, fax, letters, telephone and face-to-face meetings. By the end of 2006, the clinic has served 1,788 clients. The demand of SIS work at the international level has grown phenomenally. SIS is at the forefront of a growing international movement seeking to develop an understanding of Islam as a religion of justice and equality in the modern world. As women have been the first and the most affected by the rise of political Islam in their own communities, it is no surprise that in many Muslim countries women’s groups are organising and networking at the international level to build support, and to share knowledge and strategies to develop a more egalitarian and just vision of Islam.

Today, SIS continues to evolve at a pace that sees it growing ever stronger. The group now admits male associate members, and has organised supporters and volunteers into the Friends of SIS (FOSIS). SIS works with many more supportive men today, including scholars, muftis, and judges, and its list of local donors grows longer—with donations growing larger. SIS has moved into a larger office in a leafy old neighbourhood in Petaling Jaya and has 12 full-time staff, several part-time and project staff, and involves academics from local universities in its research projects.

From just one letter written by eight women who made the effort to study their religion
for themselves, SIS is now one of the main advocates of justice and equality in Islam—not only in Malaysia but throughout the world. For Muslims and citizens affected by unjust Muslim laws and the rise of conservatism and extremism in their societies, SIS has successfully created a public voice and a public space that enable Muslims to engage with their faith in the struggle for justice, human rights, and democracy in the twenty-first century.
“SIS has provided me with a deeper understanding of Islam as a religion of compassion, justice, and fairness. It has also demonstrated that the faith is one that respects diversity and difference. Because of its workshops, conferences, advocacy, and research that have been inclusive of Muslims and non-Muslims, I have been empowered, as a journalist, to ask questions about and write on Islam in ways that reflect the religion’s true spirit.”

Jacqueline Ann Surin
Award-winning journalist and columnist
2 Research

When the SIS founding members were confronted with practices of Islam that discriminated against women, the choice before them was clear: turning their backs on Islam was not an option. They were Muslims who believed in a just God and the importance of faith in their lives. Their only choice was to discover for themselves if Islam truly discriminated against women in the way that men in authority would have it. The desire to be both Muslim and feminist—and to locate their struggle for justice and equality within their faith—led SIS to research the foundational texts of Islam and the diversity of interpretations of the Qur’anic Text, the Hadith, and juristic opinions on a range of issues.

A principal—and urgent—question before SIS was that of power and authority: Who and on what basis was it decided that a particular interpretation of a verse, a Hadith, or juristic opinion should form the sole basis of law on issues such as gender equality, polygamy, a woman’s right to divorce, women as guardians and witnesses, women and modesty? Whose interests were served in the process of making these decisions? What of the principles of justice, equality, compassion, and mercy?

Textual scholarship proved most rewarding. The founding members of SIS discovered that the Qur’an defined an ethical vision of Islam that advocated the absolute moral and spiritual equality of women and men. The Hadith, and related literature, showed the Prophet as possibly the world’s first feminist, and contained accounts of strong and capable women among his wives, companions, and others who became leaders in their own right.

The juristic texts, meanwhile, provided a rich and diverse wealth of opinion—ranging from the belief that a woman would burn in hell should she disobey her husband, to arguments that monogamy was the ideal state of marriage in Islam. Juristic scholarship also revealed principles developed by the classical scholars, such as jihatul (to interpret, to deduce law from its sources in unprecedented cases), maqasid al-sharriah (objectives of Islamic law to ensure justice), maqasid (considerations of public interest), and istihlal (juristic preference to serve the ideals of justice and public interest), which promoted the constant reform of our understanding of Islam in dealing with the challenges of changing times and circumstances.

What was clear to SIS was the role of human agency. It is we, human beings, who engage with the revealed Text and produce a body of knowledge to guide us to live a life according to God’s will. The interpretive and juristic texts produced in the early centuries of Islam constituted the work of the great jurists of that time in order to deal with the issues and challenges in the context of their times and circumstances. Given the fact that women today are far better educated, work in order to support their families and themselves, hold leadership positions and break new ground everyday, shouldn’t the understanding of Islam and production of Islamic knowledge and laws that regard them as inherently inferior to men be changed?

SIS research into the texts—as well as new scholarship in the past 15 years that has unearthed a wealth of diversity within Muslim opinion—shows that a woman’s struggle to lead a life of equal worth and dignity to men is clearly located within Islamic teachings. This research has enabled SIS to take the unequivocal position that men and women are equal in Islam, that a Muslim man does not have the right to beat his wife, that polygamy is not an inherent right in Islam but a contract permitted only in the most exceptional circumstances, that one male witness does not equal two female witnesses... and a great deal more.

Research has also served SIS directly in its advocacy. While much of SIS’s work is topical and immediately relevant to our times, it is nonetheless grounded in critical enquiry and rigorous scholarship of Muslim religious heritage. Research has formed the basis of SIS’ arguments for legal reform, the introduction of new policies, and challenges to statements made in the name of Islam that discriminate against women and violate the ethical teachings of the religion. SIS’ research is also easily available to the public. The group has believed firmly from the beginning that all research must work to ensure that discussions on Islam and women’s rights should be informed by a variety of perspectives and guided by the principles of justice and equality.

In 2006, SIS engaged itself in two major on-going research projects in the areas of Muslim family law reform and on the impact of polygamy on family life.

Model Family Law

Muslim family laws that govern the relationships between men and women based on a framework of the superior husband and the subordinate wife are unsustainable in the twenty-first century. The medieval legal reasoning that defined the roles of the husband as ‘providing’ and the wife as ‘submissive’ has little bearing on today’s realities, especially in view of the changing status and roles of women and men.
The Qur’an provides a wealth of guiding principles to develop a new body of law on family relationships based on justice and equality. This knowledge has led SIS to commit its resources to the comprehensive reform of the Islamic family laws in Malaysia. Reform is possible—and eminently desirable—on several grounds. First, the Qur’an directly enunciates principles of Islam that support relationships based on equality between men and women, and between husbands and wives. Furthermore, these laws are based on human-made fiqh (jurisprudence), and are thus not divine and immutable. The codified law is not the sacred Syariah itself, but the product of human engagement with the revealed text. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi himself has supported the idea of reform, saying that ‘the renewal of Islamic thought must be an on-going process – ensuring the universality of the message, its pluralism and diversity, and not be ossified and fossilised by blind imitation of traditional thought and opinion’.

Secondly, existing Islamic family laws in Malaysia contravene provisions of the Federal Constitution, such as Article 8(2), which specifically forbids discrimination on the basis of gender. As they stand, the individual family laws in each State also violate key aspects of our domestic policies, and contain provisions that have proven inequitable compared to civil laws governing the same matters for non-Muslims.

Malaysia must also institute legal reform if it is to fulfil its commitments to international human rights standards. Our country is a signatory to the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. In addition, Malaysia is morally—if not legally—bound to observe the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which is generally recognised as international customary law, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the Non-Aligned Movement’s Putrajaya Declaration, which Malaysia strongly promoted in its role as host and chair of the meeting at which it was adopted. Finally, our Islamic family laws must reflect the realities of modern life. As the Prime Minister said: ‘Ensuring the rights of women will require reform and renewal in Islamic thought... The problems that contemporary Muslim societies are confronted with today are not the problems of the sixth century, and the solutions we need today do not lie with the notion of a Syariah purportedly final and complete fourteen hundred years ago - particularly in the case of women.’ Our laws must, therefore, address the complexities and realities of modern life while accounting for the universal and eternal principles of justice and equality in Islam.

In 2005, SIS began its work on a model Muslim Family Law based on the principles of justice and equality. The model law would serve as a lobbying tool to promote law reform and provide material for SIS public education and training programmes on women’s rights in Islam. The draft was presented to international scholars and activists in March 2006 at a workshop entitled ‘Trends in Family Law Reform in the Muslim World’. Today, the Guide continues to be a work in progress. SIS and its international partners from 19 Muslim countries and Muslim minority contexts are using SIS’s experiences and those from other countries to plan an international movement for Muslim Family Law reform, to be launched in 2008.
Polygamy & Family Life

This large-scale study on the impact of polygamy on the family began in 2003, when the issue of polygamy again dominated national news headlines and the imaginations of decision-makers and the public. In January of that year, the Perlis State Government proposed to relax conditions previously imposed on men seeking to contract polygamous marriages—a development that included removing the requirement of consent from existing wives. The ensuing controversy resulted in strong proposals to amend the existing Islamic Family Laws of each State; and arguments were presented both for and against the facilitation of polygamous marriages, and for the standardisation of the law in all States.

SIS initiated a campaign called ‘Monogamy: My Choice’ (Monogami Pilihanku), which in turn caused further debate in Parliament and the media. In the midst of these discussions, empirical data supporting the protection of Muslim women’s rights in the family, particularly in relation to polygamy, became critically necessary—a need which SIS identified immediately.

In 2004 and early 2005, SIS conducted a pilot survey of 41 respondents within the Klang Valley region. These preliminary results served to provide focus for more extensive nationwide research, which began in 2006 and involved a team of researchers composed of academics, SIS staff, and women’s rights activists. This research group reviewed existing literature, built hypotheses, developed research questions, objectives, methodology, work processes and questionnaires.

The main research questions sought to determine the impact of polygamy on the quality of family life, and to examine how its practice affected five critical areas:

- Relationships within the family
- The financial situation of the family
- The health and emotional well-being of each family member.
- The social relationships of the members of the family
- How legal institutions and frameworks protect the interests of members of polygamous households.

The objectives of this survey were to:

- Deepen understanding of the experiences of family life for members of polygamous Muslim households in Malaysia.
- Assess the perceptions about, and understanding of, polygamy (in particular, against the normative discourses surrounding polygamy under Islam in Malaysia) among members of polygamous households.
- Determine the needs and concerns of members of Muslim polygamous households in terms of quality of family relationships, finances, emotional well-being, social relationships, and legal institutions and frameworks.
- Raise awareness of the effects and impact of polygamy on families, with particular attention to the general public, legislative and religious authorities, and civil society.
- From the findings, advocate reform of Islamic laws and systems in relation to polygamy, conduct public awareness campaigns, and provide input into policy formulation on existing programmes and activities related to Muslim marriages such as kebajikan bahagia (happy family) and kursus pra-perkahwinan (pre-marital courses).

To expand the breadth of and build resources for this study, the structure of the research project facilitated collaboration between SIS and researchers from three universities—Universiti Malaya, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, and Universiti Sains Malaysia. SIS played, and continues to play, a central role in project coordination and implementation.

Research methodology was finalised at the end of 2006, and the research questionnaires were set after comprehensive review and assessment. The training of enumerators and research assistants had also commenced by this time, with a view to beginning fieldwork in 2007.

The project’s main challenge lay in securing funding sufficient to meet the sampling frame, and to provide for a nationwide research capacity. Much effort was required to coordinate funding applications with research grants at different universities, as well as to level and standardise the methodology, framework, and timelines among the parties involved.

This is a seminal research initiative, and to date no existing study on the impact of polygamy on the family institution has been conducted at a national level. The results are anticipated to impact greatly on—and benefit—policy- and law-makers. Research outcomes will also provide valuable insight for, and foundation to, SIS advocacy promoting the rights of women within the framework of an Islam based on the principles of justice and equality.
‘AMDF has always regarded SIS as the dear ‘big’ sister who played a vital role in our growth and development as individual women and as an organisation. The advanced training courses, conferences, and workshops on Islam that SIS organised provided the sustenance that we badly needed as we confronted our dilemmas and confusions as Muslim women advocating human rights and women’s rights within the context of Islam.’

Yasmin Busran-Lao
Executive Director and Founding President, Al-Mujadilah Development Foundation (AMDF), Marawi City, Philippines
In 2000, SIS began developing its public education programme by reviving its earlier practice of holding regular study sessions. It also developed a training module designed to expose participants to the construction of Islamic law, the methodology and principles used to derive law, and the rich diversity of the interpretive and juristic traditions which open the religion to new understandings to deal with changing times and circumstances.

SIS adopted a pro-faith position that articulated Islam’s exhortations to uphold justice and equality. The group sought to raise public awareness of the diversity of opinions and interpretations of Islam, and to revive the tradition of debate and enquiry in one’s continuous search for a life lived according to the principles of justice and equality, compassion, and mercy.

The SIS Public Education Unit has since expanded to include information and communications as part of a cohesive strategy to generate better-informed public discussions on Islamic issues that would in turn empower those hitherto unable to speak against injustice and discrimination, and to influence policies and laws made in the name of Islam.

When SIS revived its study sessions in 2000, it was only open to Muslim women as the group believed then that women would feel more comfortable discussing issues of discrimination and women’s rights in a safe and protected environment. Before long, however, a growing number of concerned Muslim men indicated an interest to join the discussions, and they were soon followed by those of other faiths. When the SIS study sessions grew to include discussions on larger issues of political Islam (for example, freedom of religion and the application of Hudud laws) the group decided to open its doors to all interested parties.

In 2000, SIS continued to organise study sessions, led by local and international speakers, to provide an important forum for Malaysians of all faiths to critically engage with issues and challenges facing the Muslim world today. Speakers have included the Grand Mufti of Bosnia-Herzegovina Raisul-Ulama, Mustafa Ceric, and Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, Chairman of the Cordova Initiative (USA), who spoke on ‘Challenges of Muslims in Plural Societies’ to SIS associate member, Dr Farish A. Noor, who led a discussion on ‘Who Speaks for Islam? Power, Politics and Representation’. Other topics discussed in 2006 included: ‘Discriminatory Amendments to the Islamic Family Law, Islamic State: Fact or Fiction’, and ‘Malaysian Muslim Identities: Issues and Concerns’. Attendance at SIS study sessions range from an average of 30 to over 100, depending on the topics and speakers.

In 2000, SIS developed a highly popular training module dealing with the formulation of Islamic law, its application and impact on women’s rights, and the possibilities for its reform. Based on these modules, SIS organised training workshops to serve the needs of different target groups—needs ranging from raising basic awareness and knowledge of Islam and women’s human rights, to building capacities as rights advocates in Muslim contexts both locally and internationally. These workshops provided SIS the opportunity to engage with journalists, lawyers, politicians, activists, students, artists, and grassroots service providers in discussions on a wide range of contemporary issues in Islam.

As part of its 2006 campaign to protest the passage of the Islamic Family Law (Federal Territories) (Amendment) Bill, SIS redoubled its efforts to reach out directly to women—especially single mothers—affected by discriminatory Syariah provisions. Two ‘Women for Women’ workshops sought to focus the attention of Muslim women on their rights, as well as to take positive steps to assert those rights in the face of injustice. Oriented towards capacity-building, the workshops included training in advocacy and the formation of support networks.

In 2006, SIS continued its series of Large-Group Training Awareness (LGTA) workshops, which support preliminary efforts to reach out to grassroots women and service providers. As part of this programme, SIS conducted a workshop on ‘Women’s Rights and Responsibilities in Islam’ for 113 enthusiastic women teachers, Government officers, and NGO leaders in Kota Bharu. Jointly organised with the Syariah division of the Kelantan Bar, this LGTA included the participation of Datuk Haji Ismail Yahya, the Mufti of Terengganu, who led a session on women’s rights from the Islamic legal perspective. As a result of strong interest in and support for
In 2006, SIS continued organising its annual Public Lecture Series, begun in 1995 as part of the group’s efforts to expose Malaysians to alternative progressive ideas in Islam. SIS Public Lecture speakers ranged from the Egyptian reformist scholar Dr Fathi Osman to Prof Abdullahi An-Naim (Sudan), Prof Amina Wadud (USA), Dr Tariq Ramadan (Switzerland), and Prof Amin Abdullah (Indonesia).

In 2006, the group spoke at a series of public forums to build support for its campaign against the discriminatory amendments to the Islamic Family Law. Beginning in December 2005, interest in the forums soon gathered momentum and SIS spoke at 10 forums between January and May 2006. Hundreds of women and men and their children attended these talks. This included a SIS-organised forum at the HELP Institute in Kuala Lumpur where an overflowing crowd of over 250 attended. The National Council of Women’s Organisations (NCWO), the Women’s Institute of Malaysia (KANITA) at Universiti Sains Malaysia in Penang, and the Sin Chew Daily, which seeks to make topical and contested issues in Islam more accessible, and to engage academics, researchers, students, lawyers, journalists, decision-makers, and activists in active debate. Each edition has a print run of 3,000 and focuses on a single issue only. The first issue, ‘Trends in Islamic Family Law Reform’, went through two reprints within six months in 2006. The same year saw the publication of the bulletin’s second edition, ‘Diversity of Opinions: An Islamic Legacy’. The most enthusiastic feedback has come from readers who appreciated the way SIS has packaged the state of the debate on religion and modernity, as well as other issues including inter-ethnic and inter-religious relations, the political system as well as gender and human rights.

The group continues to receive journalists, public officials, diplomats, researchers, and academics who come to Malaysia to meet leaders and opinion makers under the ISIS International Visitors programme.

Publications

SIS places great emphasis on publishing as a means of reaching wider audiences, and has been developing a comprehensive publications programme in English and Bahasa Malaysia since 1991. To date, SIS and its members have authored 16 of the 23 titles in the SIS publications catalogue.

Study Tours

There is an increasing international demand for SIS to share its knowledge, skills and strategies with other Muslim women and community leaders. In 2006, SIS organised three study tours of Malaysia for 30 activists, scholars, religious and community leaders, and public officials from Iraq, Zanzibar, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, and Nepal. The participants sought to examine how Malaysia, as an economically advanced Muslim country, balanced the needs of religion and modernity, as well as other issues including inter-ethnic and inter-religious relations, the political system as well as gender and human rights.

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SIS publications also continue to serve the needs of many academics teaching Islamic law, gender studies, and comparative law, who use SIS materials as reference and reading sources for students.

Some titles in the SIS question-and-answer booklets have been translated into Urdu, Bengali, and Mandarin. The group has also received requests for the some of the titles to be translated into Pashto and Dari for Afghanistan, Arabic, and Tamil.

Media

Since the publication of its first public statement (on polygamy, in 1990), SIS has been profiled by major newspapers and magazines in Malaysia, as well as international publications including The New York Times, The International Herald Tribune, The Chicago Tribune, The Los Angeles Times, The Guardian, The Sydney Morning Herald, Time and Asiaweb. SIS has also provided critical resources for television programming on Islamic matters, and SIS members and staff have appeared on programmes produced by Al Jazeera, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Public Broadcasting Station (PBS), Central Broadcasting System (CBS), Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), and RTM, TV3, NTV7, and Astro Ria in Malaysia.

In 2006, SIS gave 40 published interviews and made numerous TV and radio appearances in both local and international media. SIS leadership in campaigning against the discriminatory amendments to the Islamic Family Laws brought it to front-page prominence twice in local newspapers. The group also endeavoured to engage more constructively with the Malay-language press to provide the Malay-speaking Muslim population better access to ideas of justice and rights in Islam.
Website

The SIS website sistersinislam.org.my was revamped in June 2006 and is now fully bilingual (in English and Bahasa Malaysia). The website contains an extensive archive of all SIS Letters to the Editor, press statements, memoranda to the Government, as well as lists of programmes and activities, and recommended reading materials. The SIS weekly legal column in Utusan Malaysia is also uploaded and categorised for easy reference on the website.

The website also contains an online catalogue of books and publications in the SIS resource centre, and targets the needs of researchers, activists, students, policymakers, journalists, scholars, and others in need of resources on Islam and women’s rights. Users of the SIS website are mainly drawn from Malaysia, the US, Europe, the Middle East (especially Saudi Arabia and Bahrain), as well as Asian countries such as India and Singapore.

Resource Centre

In 2006, SIS moved to a new office that provided additional space for its growing resource centre. The SIS resource centre currently holds more than 2,000 books, as well as other resources such as periodicals, conference papers, pamphlets, brochures, audio-visual materials, and newspaper clippings. Use of the resource centre is free for SIS members and FOSIS, and is open to the public for a RM50 annual fee.

Public Education Calendar 2006

14 Jan 06
Taklimat dan Perbincangan Tentang Undang-Undang Keluarga Islam
(A Briefing and Discussion on Islamic Family Law)
Organised by National Council of Women’s Organisations (NCWO)
Speakers: Zainah Anwar and Nik Noriani Nik Badli Shah, and two officials from the Islamic Development Department (JAKIM)

15 Jan 06
Islamic Family Law – Why the Discrimination?
Organised by Sisters In Islam
Speakers: Zainah Anwar, Nik Noriani Nik Badli Shah and Zaitun Kasim

16 Jan 06
Islamic Family Law Bill
Organised by Faculty of Law, Universiti Malaya
Speaker: Nik Noriani Nik Badli Shah and academic staff

24 Jan 06
Islamic Family Law – Towards Justice?
Organised by Sin Chew Daily
Speakers: Zainah Anwar and Dr Shad Saleem Faruqi

10 Feb 06
A Dialogue on ‘Rang Undang-Undang Keluarga Islam Wilayah Persekutuan Pindaan 2005’
(Islamic Family Law Amendment Bill, Federal Territories, 2005)
Organised by KL Bar Council
Speakers: Nik Noriani Nik Badli Shah and Razlinawati Razali

4 Mar 06
Islamic Family Law – Break the Silence!
Organised by Women’s Institute of Management (WIM)
Speakers: Zainah Anwar and Nik Noriani Nik Badli Shah

8 Mar 06
Islamic Family Law – Towards Justice
Organised by Gerakan Women’s Wing
Speakers: Zainah Anwar, Zaitun Kasim, and Nik Noriani Nik Badli Shah

29 Mar 06
Seminar Undang-Undang Keluarga Islam (Islamic Family Law Seminar)
Organised by KANITA (Women’s Development Research Center), USM Penang
Speakers: Zainah Anwar, Nik Noriani Nik Badli Shah, and Zaidah Abdul Rahman (a SIS client), a Syariah lawyer and a JAKIM official.
9 Apr 06  Islamic Family Law and Its Implications to Malaysians of Other Faiths
Organised by Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism and Taoism (MCCBCHST)
Speaker: Nik Noriani Nik Badli Shah

3 May 06  Islamic Family Law
Organised by Malaysian Culture Group
Speakers: Nik Noriani Nik Badli Shah and Razlinawati Razali

Workshops/Training

20 May 06  Writing on Muslim Women’s Issues for Young Activists
Trainer: Jac SM Kee (social and gender activist)

24 June 06  Women and Women (Women for Women) with Single Mothers, Kuala Lumpur
Facilitators: Razlinawati Razali and Norhayati Kaprawi
Resource person: Nik Noriani Nik Badli Shah

26 June -  Women and Rights in Islam for Iraqi MPs, Academics and Professionals
3 July 06  Facilitators: Zaitun Mohamed Kasim and Shanon Shah Sidik
Resource persons: Zainah Anwar and Norhayati Kaprawi

17 - 21  Islam and Women for South Asian Muslim Leaders
Sept 06  Facilitators: Zaitun Mohamed Kasim, Shanon Shah, and Rozana Isa

2 Nov 06  Large-Scale Training Awareness: Tanggungjawab dan Hak Wanita dalam Islam
(Responsibilities and Rights of Women in Islam) for grassroots women in Kelantan
Speakers: Mufti of Terengganu Dato’ Ismail Yahya, lawyer Ahmad Daud, and Razlinawati Razali (SIS)

18 Nov 06  Women and Women (Women for Women) with Single Mothers, Kuala Lumpur
Facilitators: Razlinawati Razali and Norhayati Kaprawi
Resource person: Nik Noriani Nik Badli Shah

4 - 8 Dec 06  Women’s Rights in Islam for Leaders of Faith-based Organisations in Zanzibar
Facilitators: Zaitun Kasim, Shanon Shah Sidik, and Rozana Isa

"I never fail to reward any worker among you for any work you do, be you male or female, you are equal to one another..."

Al-Qur’an 3:195
Study Sessions

21 Jan 06 Campaign Against the IFL Amendment 2005
By Razrinawati Razzali and Shanon Shah Sidik

12 Feb 06 Challenges of Muslims in Plural Societies
By Grand Mufti of Bosnia-Herzegovina Raisul-Ulama, Mustafa Cenic and Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, Chairman of The Cordova Initiative (US),

30 Mar 06 Tudung (The Headscarf)
By Nik Abdul Aziz bin Hj Hassan, former Head of the Jabatan Pengajian Dakwah (Department of Missionary Studies), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

1 Apr 06 Public Interest Litigation: The Indian Experiment with Judicial Activism
By Nazia Yusuf, Harvard Law School researcher, LLM candidate

6 May 06 Islamic State – Fact or Fiction?
By Khalid Jaafar, Executive Director of IKD (Institute for Policy Research)

16 Aug 06 Who Speaks for Islam: Politics, Power, and Representation
By Dr Farish A. Noor

16 June 06 Women’s Rights and Identity Politics: The Bosnian & Pakistan Viewpoints
By Adrian Huskic, Member of the Board, Foreign Policy Initiative of Bosnia and Herzegovina; and Gulmina Bilal, author of Women Parliamentarians: Swimming Against the Tide

9 Nov 06 A Survey on Malaysian Muslim Identities: Issues and Concerns
By Dr Patricia Martinez, Asia Europe Institute, Universiti Malaya

29 Nov 06 Gender, Human Rights, and Syariah Law
By Zaitun Mohamed Kasim

International Public Forum

19 Mar 06 Muslim Women Speak: Right to Public Participation
Speakers: Prof Kecia Ali, Dr Ziba Mir Hossein, and Cassandra Balchin

Q&A BOOKLETS

In English:

• Are Muslim Men Allowed to Beat their Wives? 1991 (2nd printing 2000)
• Islam and Family Planning, April 2001 (2nd printing August 2001, 3rd printing April 2003)
• Islam and Polygamy, 2002
• Hadith on Women in Marriage, 2004

In Bahasa Malaysia

• Islam dan Perancangan Keluarga, 2001, (2nd printing 2002)
• Islam dan Poligami, 2003

SEMINAR BOOKS

• Hadiah ke Malaysia: The Issues at Stake, 1995
• Islam, Reproductive Health and Women’s Rights, 2000
• Islamic Family Law & Justice for Muslim Women, 2003

SIS BULLETIN: Baraza!

• Diversity of Opinion: An Islamic Legacy, 2006
• Islam and Human Rights: Conflicting or Complementary, 2007

Other Publications

• Muslim Women and the Challenge of Islamic Extremism, 2005

Publications Catalogue
‘One of SIS’s Q&A booklets explained that a man should never hit his wife. Prior to that, I was under the impression that a husband had some kind of right to do so. The booklet certainly enlightened me that I was in the right and that I have a right to be treated fairly and with respect. SIS’s members were very supportive throughout my years of litigation. It has been an amazing journey of self-growth and I would like to thank SIS for its unfailing support.’

Aida Melly Binti Tan Mutalib
Assistant Director, International Islamic University Malaysia Press
Legal Services & Advocacy

Case 1: Aida Melly
Delay in Obtaining Divorce

Aida Melly was married for eight years. It took her another seven years to get a divorce from her husband on the grounds of physical and mental abuse, and non-payment of nafkah (maintenance). While her husband was able to begin a new life with another wife and two additional children, Aida spent seven years going up and down the courts to get her rights under the law.

Sisters In Islam worked with a single mothers’ group to provide Aida with legal and moral support. It also accompanied her to the courts, and helped her with media strategies and letters of appeal to the authorities to have her case settled in the face of obvious gender bias and discrimination by the Syariah Court.

Case 2: Zaidah
Matrimonial Property

Zaidah requested help from the SIS Legal Clinic when she failed to lift a court order obtained by her ex-husband to freeze all her bank accounts so that he could claim his share of matrimonial assets after their divorce. Zaidah, a homemaker, had no income, and depended fully on her savings. While her ex-husband, who earned about RM30,000 monthly, was able to lift two freeze orders she placed on his assets, she in turn was unable to lift his order on her accounts for over a year.

SIS assisted her in writing several letters to the authorities to point out the injustice done to her, and to highlight her case in the media. The publicity eventually enabled Zaidah to obtain a court order to withdraw a certain amount of money on a monthly basis for her maintenance. The final settlement of her case is still being decided by the Syariah Court, but heard by a different judge.

Legal Services

The establishment of the SIS Legal Unit is grounded in the often difficult experiences of women seeking justice within the Syariah system. While SIS has assisted women, such as Aida Melly, on an ad hoc basis since 1998, it was not until 2003 that the group decided to offer regular legal services, in addition to its research, advocacy, and public education work. Given the many legal aid clinics set up by the Government, State Bar Committees, university law faculties, and other service organisations, SIS had resisted duplicating work already done by others. This decision was
reversed, however, in view of the overwhelming public response to the weekly legal literacy column SIS began in Utusan Malaysia in September 2002. The numerous phone calls and emails from many distressed Muslim women seeking legal advice drew SIS’s attention to the urgent demand for gender-sensitive legal advisory services. Many of the women who approached SIS had already sought legal counsel from other agencies, but still needed more assistance.

Led by SIS lawyers trained in feminist legal theory and practice, the Unit provides gender-sensitive legal services and seeks to empower women by accessing the rights granted them under the Islamic Family Law.

SIS recognises that this service-based approach must be accompanied by a longer-term strategy to reform the law and the administration of justice in the Syariah system. The Legal Clinic’s case-load, therefore, provides the data necessary to strengthen SIS’s advocacy strategies for systemic change that will ensure justice prevails in the name of Islam. To that end, the Legal Services and Advocacy Unit promotes a legal system that delivers justice to women in terms of the substance, culture, and the structure of the law.

The SIS Legal Services and Advocacy Unit works to:

- Provide high-quality gender-sensitive legal services
- Monitor, assess, and advocate reform of the Syariah system to promote women’s access to justice
- Raise women’s awareness of their rights under the law, as well as enhance their critical legal literacy.

Legal Clinic

Since its inception in 2003, the SIS legal clinic has helped over 1,768 clients.

Men and women get in touch with SIS via email, fax, and post. The clinic also provides face-to-face counselling for clients who prefer personal contact with a SIS legal officer. The nature of the cases dealt with have ranged from marriage, divorce, maintenance, inheritance, children’s rights, custody, and to those within the jurisdiction of Syariah criminal laws including khalwat (close proximity) and zina (adultery). SIS’s lawyers also advise and accompany women intending to lodge police reports and other legal complaints, as well as to court during the course of their cases. Lawyers also assist women in the management of their cases, and observe court proceedings. The Legal Clinic is assisted by three or four pupils-in-chambers provided by the Kuala Lumpur and Selangor Bar Legal Aid Centres for three-month attachments.

The gratitude expressed by women for the advice and support the Clinic provides continues to assure SIS that its legal services remain highly valued by the community. Indeed, some former clients have in turn supported SIS advocacy by coming forward to share their experiences with the legal system at media events, as well as by participating actively in SIS training programmes for single mothers.

In order to ensure that legal information pertaining to the Syariah system remains adequate, accurate, and timely, SIS also conducts regular workshops for lawyers and pupils-in-chambers to familiarise them with the processes and procedures of the Syariah Court, case management, and to present first-hand experience and knowledge of the realities that women face in accessing the justice system. SIS and two other JAG members run the training programme four times a year for groups of 20.

Legal Literacy

In the course of providing its legal services, SIS found that many women were unwilling or unable to seek legal remedy because they lacked sufficient knowledge of legal procedures and information about their rights.

To address this urgent concern, SIS conducts several projects designed to raise women’s legal literacy, including the projects described below:

SIS continues to write Ruangan Undang-Undang dan Keluarga (Law and Family)—which appears every Friday in the Bahasa Malaysia daily Utusan Malaysia. Due to the column’s wide readership, Fridays and Mondays have proven the busiest days at the SIS Legal Clinic. The column takes the form of questions and answers focusing on a particular problem chosen from the Clinic’s case files. Subjects have included the application and procedure of Islamic law on issues such as mahr (spousal and child maintenance), divorce...
and marriage, inheritance law and the division of matrimonial assets, *khul’* and adultery. Besides publication in the large-circulation *Utusan*, the columns are regularly compiled and uploaded to the SIS website for easy access and reference.

SIS is grateful to *Utusan Malaysia* for continuing to provide this invaluable space, and for publicising this much-needed service to its readers for the past five years.

In 2006, the Legal Unit began producing a series of leaflets entitled ‘Know Your Rights’. Written in a simple question-and-answer format, the leaflets focus on specific topics on women’s rights, for example: *Ada apa dengan Ta’liq* (What’s with the Marriage Contract), *Nafkah Isteri* (Wife’s Maintenance), *Darra'ah di Luar Mahkamah* (Divorce Outside the Court). In addition to providing information on the law and court procedure, the leaflets help empower women and the public, and encourage them to contact the appropriate authorities to present complaints, as well as to propose reform to existing legislation and legal procedure.

A major distribution drive is planned for 2007 at outreach activities and also through other NGOs and service providers.

### CourtWatch

First introduced in November 2006, the CourtWatch programme seeks to monitor court proceedings in order to identify the problems women encounter with the system.

Through CourtWatch, SIS plans to compile the documentation necessary to propose changes to legislation and court procedure, and to ensure that judges, lawyers, guardians, and psychologists execute their duties in a professional and gender-sensitive manner.

The CourtWatch programme is supported by pupils-in-chambers and volunteers who monitor and document the proceedings and processes of the Syariah Courts. Besides gathering crucial data, the programme also exposes legal students to the realities women face in the Syariah Courts.

SIS plans to analyse the compiled data and highlight the outcomes of the monitoring efforts. It will widely circulate positive court judgments and practices in the expectation that greater public attention will promote a better understanding of, and better practices within, the Syariah Courts.

### Data Analysis

In 2006, SIS began analysing in greater detail the wealth of data obtained from the hundreds of cases that the Legal Unit deals with annually. The Unit has begun to develop a system to record the kinds of divorce being requested, factors cited by clients as contributing to the breakdown of their marriages, and the problems faced in obtaining maintenance either for women or their children at the systemic or personal levels.

For example, while *khul’* divorce (cerai tebus talaq) is reportedly common (and easy to obtain) in Pakistan, the process appeared unpopular in Malaysia and little was known about the reasons why. Documentation and analysis of SIS case data have indicated a possible reason: *khul’* divorce is time-consuming, and judges are allowed wide discretion in determining the amount of maintenance payable if no prior agreement exists between the spouses. Usually that amount has been prohibitive for women.

SIS is currently working with JAG members which also provide legal services to develop a standardised data collection form, which will provide more detailed information for analysis to support eventual policy and law reform.

### Cases Handled by the SIS Legal Clinic in 2006, According to Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case Type</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Registration of Marriage/Marriage Procedures</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polygamy</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorce Procedures</td>
<td>246</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alimony, Compensation, &amp; Matrimonial Assets</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wife’s Maintenance</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Custody (Hadhamel)</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children’s Maintenance</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wife’s Chastity (Mu’ayyad)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic Violence</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reconciliation (Ijli’r)</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children Born out of Wedlock</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adoption of Children</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorce of Property (Fasali)</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gifts (Wasti)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syrian Criminal Offences</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversion Procedures</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Harassment</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complaints about Syariah Court</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appointment of Lawyers</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complaints about Lawyers</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Court Orders/Enforcement of Orders</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselling</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wasiat</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>722</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The total number of cases do not directly represent the number of clients assisted by SIS. A single client may face more than one problem.
SIS, together with the Joint Action Group for Gender Equality (JAG), have long been working towards reviewing and streamlining the Islamic Family Law of Malaysia to end discrimination against women.

In January 2002, SIS submitted a 42-page memorandum to the Government in response to discriminatory amendments being made to Malaysian Islamic Family Law. This draft model statute was meant to be the basis of a standardised Islamic Family Law to replace the different Islamic legislation in force in each of the 14 states. However, the draft contained several discriminatory amendments, including giving men more grounds to divorce their wives, greater freedom to enter into polygamous marriages, and more power to freeze their wives’ assets in order to claim a share of the matrimonial property when a polygamous marriage or divorce takes place.

SIS held several briefings and meetings with women’s groups and the authorities—including the Minister for Women, Family and Community Development, Datuk Seri Shahrizat Abdul Jalil, and Ministry officials—in order to prevent the discriminatory amendments being made to the Bill. The Senators submitted a letter to Minister in the Prime Minister’s Department (in charge of religious affairs), Datuk Abdullah Zin, requesting him to withdraw the Bill and to conduct a review before retabling it in Parliament. The Senators were outraged by the Bill. Despite this, the Dewan Rakyat (Lower House) passed the Bill. Disappointed by the outcome, SIS still held out for an opportunity to engage the Dewan Negara (Senate) in the debate. This was a new strategy for SIS, which it felt could be a productive starting point for further advocacy—especially since women made up about 30 per cent of the sitting Senators.

In this regard, SIS held several briefing sessions with small groups of Senators, taking them through the discriminatory amendments, the differing Islamic juristic opinions which advocated equality and justice for women, as well as legal and judicial practices in other Muslim countries. The Senators were outraged by the Bill. Some Senators to vote with the rest of the Government for the Bill. The Minister was reported as saying: ‘If there are Senators who are dissatisfied with this draft law, they can debate it at tomorrow’s session. A motion cannot be rejected if it has not been tabled.’ (Utusan Malaysia, Dec 22, 2005.) Furthermore, he added: ‘I stress that this is a directive, not advice—it can be rejected if it is advisory but this is a directive so it must be adhered to.’ (Berita Harian, Dec 22, 2005.)

The draft law was passed despite the concerted opposition of 19 women Senators. However, the voices that spoke in the Senate quickly drew public attention. Dayang Mahani said she cried when she saw the amendments: ‘I am emotional because this issue is close to my heart. I am speaking as I want my statements recorded.’ Dayang Mahani said she would vote for the Bill ‘against her conscience’ and apologised to her daughter and women in general. (New Straits Times, Dec 23, 2005.)

SIS then urged women and men who were concerned about the developments to write to the media and relevant Ministers, including the Prime Minister Datuk Seri Ahmad Badawi, Datuk Seri Shahrizat Abdul Jalil and Datuk Abdullah Zin. SIS also launched a signature campaign and gave many public talks.

A number of MPs, from both Government and Opposition benches in Lower house did their utmost to point out the flaws in the law. A male backbencher in the Lower House was concerned by these developments: ‘I applaud him to withdraw the Bill and to conduct a review before because while I was a law-maker, I did not take care of their interests.’ (The Star, Oct 2, 2005.)

Sadly, the day before the debate, Minister in the Prime Minister’s Department Datuk Seri Nazri Aziz was reported to have asked the women Senators to vote with the rest of the Government in support of the Bill. The Minister was reported as saying: ‘If there are Senators who are dissatisfied with this draft law, they can debate it at tomorrow’s session. A motion cannot be rejected if it has not been tabled’ (Utusan Malaysia, Dec 22, 2005.)

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SIS Annual Review 2006

Campaign Against Discriminatory Amendments to the Islamic Family Law
to garner support and show the Government that a significant proportion of the Malaysian public was deeply opposed to Parliament’s support of the Bill.

Finally, due to the unprecedented public outcry, the Cabinet decided against gazetting the Bill. In addition, the Government directed Attorney General Tan Sri Abdul Gani Patail to consult the Syariah community (comprising several bodies including Government religious departments and NGOs) to address the concerns expressed by the Senators and women’s groups, and to amend the discriminatory provisions. SIS and JAG members were actively involved in these negotiation processes.

The consultation proved productive and the meetings were steered skillfully by the Attorney General to reconcile the conflicting interests of the different communities. Although SIS is still awaiting the tabling of the new amendments in Parliament, it is proud of the debate, the public support and the media coverage it generated in support of women facing discrimination under the proposed revisions. For SIS, this episode represented progress in the journey towards achieving the spirit of justice and fairness enshrined in the Qur’an, and in opening up the public space for debate on public law.

Help Us Help Others

SIS is constantly in search of lawyers with some Syariah background willing to volunteer their time and expertise to aid Muslim women in need of legal assistance. Lawyers can participate in the SIS legal programme directly by handling a set number of cases per month through the SIS e-lawyers service, or, if they prefer, they may choose to work with clients personally at the SIS office.

Those with other crucial skills such as data-entry, case-analysis, writing, translating, editing, and design are also very much in demand.

Leaflets from the ‘Know Your Rights’ series which are distributed during SIS outreach events.
Ziba Mir-Hosseini
An independent consultant, researcher and writer on Middle Eastern issues, specialising in gender, family relations, Islam, law, and development.
The strength and effectiveness of SIS as a voice for change in Malaysia is derived partly from its membership of JAG, the Joint Action Group for Gender Equality. JAG was founded in 1985 to raise national awareness of violence against women, and to campaign for a domestic violence law. SIS has long been a part of this network—first as individuals and later as SIS when the group was established. JAG members now comprise SIS, All Women’s Action Society (AWAM), Women’s Aid Organisation (WAO), Women’s Centre for Change, Penang (WCC), Women’s Development Collective (WDC), and Women’s Committee of the Malaysian Trades Union Congress (MTUC). The coalition works to push for reform of laws that discriminate against women, and to raise public awareness of the urgent need for gender equality.

Given the special focus of each JAG member, one NGO usually leads a particular issue, with support and input from others. In 2006, SIS led JAG in the campaign against discriminatory amendments to the Islamic Family Laws, including the subsequent negotiations with the Attorney General’s Chambers to review and make amendments. SIS also provided input into other JAG activities, including submissions to the Parliamentary Select Committee on reform of the Penal Code and the Criminal Procedure Code (especially on the issue of marital rape), as well as consultations in drafting the Gender Discrimination Bill (both of these were led by WCC). In preparing for the NGO Shadow Report on CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women), JAG, led by WAO, worked closely with the National Council of Women’s Organisations (NCWO).

SIS played an important role in the processes leading to the drafting of the Shadow Report, as well as during the NGO Informal Meeting with the 35th Session of the CEDAW Committee in New York in June, to raise critical issues affecting women in Malaysia.

SIS provided significant input regarding the growing trend of discrimination against Muslim women, with particular focus on amendments to Islamic Family Laws over the past two decades that have systematically diminished the rights of women through the creation of unfair conditions regarding polygamy, divorce, maintenance, and child custody. The NGOs also raised awareness on the range of problems resulting from the separation of jurisdiction (and application of different laws) for Muslims and people of other faiths—especially in cases where one of two non-Muslim spouses decides to convert to Islam. Another issue of discrimination highlighted at the CEDAW Committee session was the impact of the Syariah Criminal Offence Enactments, which have increasingly infringed upon the privacy of citizens under the guise of ‘morality’ and ‘public decency’.

Many NGO inputs were taken into consideration by the CEDAW Committee, leading to its Concluding Comments which, among others, called for the Malaysian Government to undertake a process of law reform to remove inconsistencies between civil and Syariah law, and to source information on jurisprudence based on progressive interpretations of Islamic law. SIS continued to work with JAG and NCWO in proposing actions the Government should take to address the concerns and recommendations of the CEDAW Committee.

Apart from being an active partner in the women’s movement in Malaysia, SIS has always believed that the struggle to uphold and defend full human rights for women cannot be achieved in an environment in which basic civil and political rights are denied. Specifically in Malaysia, SIS understands that, as a women’s organisation, it is imperative that the group supports larger coalitions and campaigns seeking to expand the Malaysian public space for the purpose of debate, dialogue, and access to information. In addition, it has become ever more important that women’s human rights issues are understood to cut across a range of disciplines and cannot thus be isolated under the misleading banner of ‘women’s issues’ alone. Women’s issues include the right to assemble freely, workplace rights and freedoms (including issues surrounding women migrant workers), the need for greater participation and representation in decision-making, and a host of other concerns.

For these reasons, SIS is an active partner in many coalitions and efforts to uphold fundamental liberties and to strengthen

Friends at Home

5 National & International Networking
democratic principles and practices. In 2004, SIS and WAO led the initiative that gave birth to the Article 11 coalition.1 Article 11 is now a coalition of diverse civil society groups committed to upholding the Federal Constitution as the supreme law of the land. The group also works to protect the fundamental liberties, which includes freedom of religion, guaranteed to all citizens and residents of Malaysia.

The case that inspired the creation of Article 11 involved a non-Muslim woman, Shamala, a client of WAO, who lost parental rights over her children’s freedom of religion when her husband converted to Islam. He then converted their two small children to Islam with the Syariah Court’s consent.

For SIS and WAO, the case clearly denied a woman’s equal right to the guardianship of her young children, and of her equal right to decide on matters in a marriage where one party has converted to Islam, ruled that it had no jurisdiction over her application to have the conversion of her children nullified as they were now Muslims.

The implications of this case (and a number of subsequent high-profile cases), especially the impact of the High Court’s decision on the right of belief and the right to practise one’s belief as guaranteed under Article 11 of the Federal Constitution, led to the expansion of the Article 11 coalition to include nine other civil society organisations. In 2006, Article 11 launched a series of national public forums throughout the year to protect and uphold the Federal Constitution. However, after only the third public forum in Johor Baru, the Government ordered a halt to further forums due to tensions caused by the mobilisation of conservative Islamists.

Besides its work with Article 11, SIS also supports other campaigns that uphold civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights. SIS showed solidarity by signing and issuing public statements to protest the forced eviction of the Kampung Berembang settlers in November 2006. SIS also continues to support the Centre for Independent Journalism’s work on freedom of information regarding the state’s banning of Independent Journalism’s work on freedom of information. In 2006, SIS joined WAO, AWAM, the Malaysian AIDS Council (MAC), Amnesty International (AI), and UNICEF to celebrate IWD together with Red Aids Council (MAC), Amnesty International (AI), and UNICEF to celebrate International Women’s Day (IWD) on March 8, and 16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence (Nov 25–Dec 10). In 2006, SIS joined WAO, AWAM, the Malaysian AIDS Council (MAC), Amnesty International (AI), and UNICEF to celebrate IWD together with Red Aids Council (MAC), Amnesty International (AI), and UNICEF to celebrate International Women’s Day (IWD) on March 8, and 16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence (Nov 25–Dec 10).

Annually, SIS joins other NGOs to celebrate two international events: International Women’s Day (IWD) on March 8, and 16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence. For the annual 16 Days of Activism: 2006 Poll results indicated a heartening growth in public awareness of key issues.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>2003 (%)</th>
<th>2006 (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do you believe there are circumstances when a man can beat his wife?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>13.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>85.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No idea</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can a wife disagree if her husband wants to practise polygamy?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>71.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>25.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No idea</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Should there be a law or a dress code to regulate women’s dressing?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>14.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>79.0</td>
<td>79.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No idea</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

16 Days of Activism: 2006 Poll results indicated a heartening growth in public awareness of key issues.

outreach activities as those of the IWD were held at a shopping mall in Kuala Lumpur. During this period, SIS staff and members gave five interviews on radio and television to speak on domestic violence, rape, personal safety, and emotional and mental violence.

From Local to Global

The impact of rising conservatism and extremism in the Muslim world has been most debilitating on women as they watched the rights and status they have struggled for over the decades being steadily chiselled away in the name of Islam. It is thus not surprising that in much of the Muslim world, women’s groups have been at the forefront of a progressive movement to recognise and promote justice and equality in the face of the realities of changing times and circumstances.
As early as 1992, SIS began its international networking and invited progressive Islamic scholars to its first conferences on ‘Islam and the Modern Nation State’. This was the first SIS workshop to discuss contemporary problems and the methodological framework for addressing these debates in the field of Islamic studies. Since then, SIS has organised five international meetings and established a tradition of bringing together scholars and activists to discuss issues ranging from Islam, Culture, and Democracy to Islamic Family Law and Justice for Muslim Women.

2006 saw an expansion of SIS work at the international level in terms of capacity-building, networking, and consultation on issues surrounding women’s rights in Islam. In March, SIS organised an international consultation on “Trends in Islamic Family Law Reform in Muslim Countries”. It was jointly opened by Nori Abdullah, Marina Mahathir, and Hanis Hussein, three daughters of the present and past Prime Ministers, who performed a special monologue based on the hundreds of cases at the SIS Legal Clinic. The seminar brought together activists and established a tradition of bringing together scholars and activists to discuss issues ranging from Islam, Culture, and Democracy to Islamic Family Law and Justice for Muslim Women.

Another outcome of SIS international networking has been the demand for SIS to host study tours to Malaysia for religious and community leaders, activists, politicians, and public officials from various Muslim countries and Muslim minority communities. These tours allowed visitors the opportunity to network with Malaysian NGOs and learn the challenges and strategies of working for women’s rights within Muslim contexts. This initiative began in 2005, and in 2006 SIS conducted training programmes on women’s rights in Islam to groups from Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Iraq, and Zanzibar. The success of this collaborative project led to a subsequent request for more intensive training for Iraqi activists, which was conducted in Beirut by the SIS Chief Trainer, Zaitun Kasim.

SIS has emerged to be an important global resource on Islam, human rights and gender. At many international meetings, SIS staff and members have played important roles as panelists, speakers, and resource persons. SIS has provided input at roundtables to advance a rights-based understanding of Islam, and has shared strategies in dealing with the impact of political Islam on women’s rights and fundamental liberties. In 2006, these activities included a conference on Social Justice and Gender Equity organised by the Bangladesh Women Lawyers Association, the Women Living Under Muslim Laws network’s Plan of Action Meeting in Senegal, and the ASMA Society Women’s Islamic Initiative in Spirituality and Equity in New York. This initiative brought together over 100 Muslim women leaders, including activists, scholars, Sufi practitioners, writers, journalists, and also leading women’s human rights advocates of other faiths. SIS also attended several meetings promoting democratisation in Muslim societies organised by activists in the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia.

There is also increasing interest among some Arab activists to interact more with Southeast Asians. In April, SIS was invited to share its experiences at an international meeting organised by the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies and the Swedish Institute in Alexandria on ‘Human Rights and Renewal of Religious Discourse: How the Arab World Would Benefit from the Experiment of Renewal of Religious Discourse in the Non Arab Context’.

SIS also responds to requests from NGOs and donors requiring names of scholars, activists, as well as available research on various issues on Islam and women’s and human rights. In 2006, SIS assisted various groups in the areas of women as leaders, domestic violence, post-conflict reconstruction, democratisation, and constitutional law.

It is important that SIS continues to strengthen and build on its networking and alliances, both locally and internationally, within the women’s movement and outside of it. These alliances help SIS members and staff situate the group’s work within the larger political context in which it operates. The support and acclaim that SIS receives nationally and internationally—from both Muslim and non-Muslim activists, scholars and leaders—is crucial to the SIS support system and its effectiveness in building national and international public constituencies that work for a just Islam.
In 2003, SIS brought together Muslim women’s groups from Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines with their counterparts from Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Iran, Turkey, and Palestine. The meeting discussed the challenges participants experienced in the face of rising conservatism and extremism in their countries. The three-day Building Bridges Roundtable focused on the legal, political, and social impact of political Islam in participants’ respective societies, its impact on women’s lives in particular, the strategies used by women’s groups to deal with these challenges, and plans for future collaborations.

At the end of the Roundtable, participants identified the urgent need to deepen their knowledge of Islam, in particular to understand the emerging progressive scholarship that recognises justice and equality. This, they determined, would enable them to challenge more effectively the use of Islam to justify discrimination against women and to delegitimise women’s demands for change. At other regional and international meetings, SIS staff and members met many more women activists who expressed the same need for a better understanding of Islam in the face of rising extremism and intolerance in their societies.

In 2003, SIS brought together 14 Muslim women activists who represented organisations and networks from 11 countries: the Philippines, Thailand, Egypt, Yemen, Palestine, Sudan, Nigeria, Tanzania, Gambia, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh. Four progressive and gender-sensitive scholars of the Qur’an and Islamic law led the teaching, and three SIS staff from Malaysia facilitated and provided input into strategic planning and advocacy. The group could not have asked for a more ideal environment to organise such an intensive course than the calm and contemplative environment on the shores of Lake Como in Bellagio, Italy, where the Rockefeller Foundation generously granted SIS the use of their Conference and Study Centre.

The Course

The course, which was designed for activists who were already grounded in gender and human rights principles, but wanted to understand the possibility of working for justice and equality within the Islamic framework, had two objectives:

- to illuminate the vibrant tradition of diversity in Qur’anic interpretation and juristic opinion that permeated Islamic scholarship and society in the early years of Islam, and to understand how this diversity has influenced and impacted on women and their rights.
- to introduce alternative approaches to interpretation, namely gender-inclusive readings of the texts that address contemporary challenges and circumstances, and to understand the social construction of Islamic law, the principles used by the jurists to derive legal rulings in the context of their times, and how these principles and approaches create possibilities for reform in the context of changing times and circumstances.

In the first week of the course, sessions began with participants sharing their individual experiences of the legal, social, political, and personal impact of rising religious conservatism and fundamentalism in their societies. This enabled scholars, facilitators, and participants to place subsequent coursework within context. Participants were introduced to the science of the
The Qur’an and methodology of Hadith classification, and how different contexts in the centuries that followed had resulted in different interpretations of these texts. Tied closely to this was a session that examined the construction of Islamic law in the formative period of Islam, as well as a session on the construction of gender in Islamic legal thought. Ending the first week of the course were sessions which considered legal and social relationships in the Syariah, and a panel which discussed the place of Syariah in the modern world (including the human rights framework and the compatibility of Islam and human rights).

The first few days of the second week focused on examining contemporary approaches in interpreting the Qur’an and reading the Qur’an from a woman’s perspective, with special regard to several verses that had been particularly problematic to Muslim women, including the verses on polygamy and wife-beating. Using the effort to reform the *Hudud* laws in Pakistan as an example, participants were then taken through the social construction of Islamic law, and the challenges to law reform in the modern context.

The remainder of the course concentrated on discovering strategies for reform and advocacy. Spinning off these sessions were workshops conducted on communications and media strategies which participants requested during the course.

An important component of the course was work done to bridge the gap between the activists working on Muslim women’s rights and the scholars of Islam – both are key agents of change in societies undergoing reform. For activists, the knowledge from the scholars provided them with the confidence to tackle the challenges they encountered, especially in relation to interpretations of the text that serve to perpetuate injustice towards Muslim women. For the scholars, the interaction with activists gave meaning and relevance to their academic work as scholarship and lived realities met to bring about change on the ground.

**Gaining Confidence**

At the beginning of the course, some of the participants spoke of their discomfort at having to engage with the religious text. By the end of the course however, many of them felt that their initial fears had been allayed and, moreover, they had gained knowledge, confidence as well as the support of other participants.

One of the participants from Afghanistan recently informed SIS of her experience in engaging with 25 mullahs, and how she felt that the course had given her the knowledge and confidence to argue with them substantively within the Islamic framework on the notion that women were inferior to men. Many participants remain in touch with SIS, sharing continuing experiences and responding to each other’s requests for assistance.

The next course is planned for 2009 and participants will be selected from those who will attend the launch of two global movement for Muslim Family Law Reform Initiative.

SIS owes a debt of gratitude to the scholars who took two weeks off their busy schedules to engage and share their insights with critical feminists: Prof Khalid Masud and Prof Ziba Mir-Hosseini led the sessions on Islamic Law and Hadith, while Prof Amina Wadud and Prof Abdullah Saeed led the sessions on the Qur’an.

From Sisters In Islam, Zainah Anwar was Project Director, Zaitun Mohamed Kasim, chief facilitator, and Rozana Isa took charge of rapporteuring, documentation, and logistics.

**Participants’ Feedback on the Course**

- Brilliant resource persons!
- This was a dream-come-true course for me!
- It is great work because it brought different participants (from different cultures, backgrounds) who are engaged in exchanging ideas and experiences, besides learning new information and knowledge.
- The course was useful and interesting at three levels:
  - to meet women from other context/countries and to exchange experiences
  - to learn from the facilitators, working with each other (how SIS works as a team) and organize the course and materials and how to facilitate effectively
  - to meet the resource persons and to discuss and learn from them
- Just to express my appreciation to the Sisters In Islam for creating the opportunity to participate. I have learnt a lot from this training which I hope to take home and share with other groups. I hope that this will be the beginning of collaboration between feminist activists in Asia and Africa in promoting Muslim women’s rights from a rights perspective. This is a great job, keep it up.
'Sisters In Islam has approached Malaysian questions by firmly grounding itself in the country’s different cultures and faiths. It is, therefore, a model of Islamic organisation and leadership that is not only exemplary and laudable but viable.'

Sumit Mandal
A Historian at The Institute of Malaysia and International Studies (IKMAS), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
6 Organisational Matters

Organisational Matters

Given the expansion of SIS’s activities, the increasing number of visitors to its office and participants in its activities, the need for more space became urgent in 2006. In August, SIS moved into a spacious, bright new office in a leafy part of old Petaling Jaya, with enough room to hold its training and study sessions, and to host more than one meeting at a time.

Staffing

As is the common experience with NGOs, recruiting the right staff and retaining them remains a challenge. SIS strives to provide a nurturing, empowering, and intellectually challenging working environment. For SIS, the recruitment pool is particularly small, given the nature of the work that it does.

In 2006, SIS employed 12 full-time staff: the Executive Director, two managers, five programme officers, one accounts officer, two programme assistants, and one administrative assistant. The legal officer, an administrative assistant, and two officers under probation left and a recruitment drive was undertaken for their replacements to take over. SIS also employed four staff on a part-time or project basis. A programme manager and a programme officer worked three days a week, and a researcher was hired to coordinate the SIS nationwide polygamy research project. A SIS member was also employed on a part-time or project basis. A programme manager and a programme officer worked three days a week, and a researcher was hired to coordinate the SIS nationwide polygamy research project. A SIS member was also employed on a part-time or project basis. A programme manager and a programme officer worked three days a week, and a researcher was hired to coordinate the SIS nationwide polygamy research project. A SIS member was also employed on a part-time or project basis. A programme manager and a programme officer worked three days a week, and a researcher was hired to coordinate the SIS nationwide polygamy research project. A SIS member was also employed on a part-time or project basis. A programme manager and a programme officer worked three days a week, and a researcher was hired to coordinate the SIS nationwide polygamy research project. A SIS member was also employed on a part-time or project basis.

As an organisation that believes in the pursuit of knowledge for empowerment, SIS regularly sends its staff and members for training in Malaysia and abroad. Besides regular weekly English classes, 10 staff and members attended various training courses in 2006. These ranged from administrative, management, and financial planning skills, to understanding human rights, women’s rights, and feminist legal theory and practice.

SIS also accepts interns on a short-term basis. In 2006, a Malaysian graduate student doing her PhD at the University of California in Los Angeles spent seven months at SIS. She assisted in research, writing, and the rapporteuring of various SIS meetings, all of which was done in the midst of intensive research and interviews for her thesis topic, ‘Recreating Communities of the Faithful: Negotiating Gender, Religion and Feminism in Malaysia and Egypt’, which explores the ways SIS and the Women in Memory Forum in Egypt engage in the discourse of Islam, gender, and feminism. An Australian law student also spent a month at SIS to learn methods of advocacy and education that allowed for better understanding and access to the law for Muslim women, as well as to explore methods of educating the broader Australian community about the cultural circumstances in which Muslim women live in Australia.

Governance

SIS is governed by a Board made up of two members and a Programme and Management Committee (PMC) made up of four members. The Executive Director sits on both bodies as ex-officio member. While the Board has the minimal legal role of examining and approving SIS audited accounts, the major role of monitoring the organisation is vested in the PMC. Members with diverse skills and knowledge in organisational development, management, financial planning, fundraising, research, and advocacy, are elected to serve two-year terms. The PMC meets up to four times a year to monitor SIS programmes and activities, financial planning and fundraising, organisational development, and staff welfare and capacity building. It also gives support and guidance to the Executive Director in managing the organisation.

To strengthen the commitment and ownership of SIS, and to promote transparency and accountability, SIS staff and members meet once a year at a three-day evaluation and planning (E&P) retreat to evaluate the group’s organisational vision and direction, and to develop an 18-month strategic plan. In planning for the 2006 E&P retreat, SIS organised a strategic consultation meeting among supporters and friends to discuss ways to strengthen SIS’s work and ensure that it remained relevant to the evolving needs and concerns of Malaysian society. SIS staff also prepared for the annual retreat by undertaking a comprehensive reporting process on all activities, measuring the successes, failures, and making recommendations for improvement.
A major issue of concern discussed both at the strategic consultation and the E&P in November was the rise of supremacist thinking and mob mobilisation in the name of race and religion. These developments had directly impacted on SIS work and the political context in which the group operated. Given the disturbing political scenario, SIS identified the importance of building strategic alliances with individuals and groups at the national and international levels to protect and expand a democratic space that would enable progressive civil society organisations to grow and continue to influence public policy in Malaysia. SIS also recognised the need to intensify its training programme to build a larger grassroots constituency of empowered Muslim women who were aware of their rights, the violations of these rights when they occur, and what actions they could take to redress these situations.

Financial Highlights

SIS has been very fortunate to have enjoyed strong financial support from individual Malaysians and corporations, as well as international donors. Even though many major international donor agencies do not support national-level work because Malaysia is categorised as a rich country, some foundations and corporations, as well as international donor agencies do not support SIS work and the political context in which the group operated. Given the disturbing political scenario, SIS identified the importance of building strategic alliances with individuals and groups at the national and international levels to protect and expand a democratic space that would enable progressive civil society organisations to grow and continue to influence public policy in Malaysia. SIS also recognised the need to intensify its training programme to build a larger grassroots constituency of empowered Muslim women who were aware of their rights, the violations of these rights when they occur, and what actions they could take to redress these situations.

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The decrease in foreign funding was due to a strategic decision by SIS to raise more funds among local donors. Given the rising conservatism and extremism, SIS felt that it was important for Malaysian individuals, corporations, and foundations to support the work of SIS in building the voice of moderation in Islam. SIS issued appeal letters to potential donors and 48 individuals, corporations, and foundations responded with a total of RM151,073. SIS also began work in November 2006 to plan a Charity Film Premiere of the award-winning Indonesian film on polygamy, Berbagi Suami. It sought to raise RM120,000 to fund its nationwide research on the impact of polygamy on the family. The SIS fundraising team worked intensely to raise RM102,270 by the end of December, and was confident it would reach its target by the time of the premiere in January 2007. SIS is pleased that funds received from local donors in 2006 amounted to RM253,343, a 69.3 per cent increase compared to donations received in 2005. Also, income from SIS publications amounted to RM21,328, an increase of 82.5 per cent compared to the previous year.

SIS’s total expenses for 2006 amounted to RM1,065,742, an increase of 40 per cent compared to the previous year. This included a 141.2 per cent increase in programme funding, largely due to the two-week course in Bellagio, Italy, for Muslim women leaders on ‘Understanding Islam from a Rights Perspective’.

SIS Membership

SIS membership is by invitation only. Given the nature of the work, SIS from the very beginning did not choose an open membership system. It saw itself as a research and advocacy group where every member was expected to be actively involved in the organisation. For a long time, many were stunned that all that work was done by just eight women without an office or paid staff. Many remain surprised that SIS today is composed of no more than 30 members and staff regularly come together to celebrate birthdays and other special occasions.

members. Potential new members are expected to attend SIS events regularly, especially its study sessions, and volunteer time with SIS to understand and fully support the SIS vision and programme work, and to enable both sides to feel comfortable with each other.

SIS members actively participate in SIS research projects, fundraising activities, are elected to and sit on governance bodies, contribute to evaluation and planning retreats, volunteer to represent SIS at meetings locally and internationally, and assist in various programme and outreach activities.

Recognising the important role they play in helping SIS be more effective in its work, the group also opened its doors to gender-sensitive men committed to the SIS vision. Two men have been admitted as associate members since 2004.

Over the years, many men and women (both Muslims and those of other faiths) have expressed their interest to be a part of SIS, but have little time to be actively involved on a consistent basis. In 2005, SIS established a new category of membership called Friends of SIS (FOSIS), for which an annual contribution of RM50 is charged. FOSIS members are invited to all SIS events and special study sessions intended for SIS members and supporters only. They also receive discounts on SIS publications, merchandise, and have free use of the resource centre and receive complimentary copies of \textit{Baraza}.

There are currently 15 FOSIS members, and a formal launch and recruitment drive for new members is planned for 2008.

\textbf{SIS Organisation in 2006}

\textbf{Board of Directors}
Rozana Isa, Yasmine Merican, and Zainah Anwar (ex-officio)

\textbf{Programme and Management Committee}
Prof Norani Othman, Puan Sri Jamilah Ibrahim, Rozana Isa, Yasmine Merican/ Rashidah Abdullah, and Zainah Anwar (ex-officio)

\textbf{Executive Director}
Zainah Anwar

\textbf{Managers}
Rashidah Hashim (Operations)
Norhayati Kaprawi (Public Education, Information Communications)
Zaitun Kasim (Legal and Campaigns, part-time)

\textbf{Officers}
Razlina Awati Razali (Legal)
Noraini Abdul Murat (Legal, resigned in September)
Adibah Mohammad Jodi (Information)
Hartini Abdullah (Accounts)

\textbf{Programme Assistants}
Erzalina Shahabu Ramali (Legal)
Nurul Amani Faizal (PEIC)

\textbf{Administrative Assistant}
Esteena Arnieza Zais (resigned in October)

\textbf{Project / Part-time Staff}
Nik Noriani Nik Badli Shah (legal consultant/ Muslim Family Law researcher)
Jac Kee Siew Min (Polygamy research coordinator)
Jana Rumminger (Muslim Family Law researcher)
Shanon Shah Mehd Sidik (\textit{Baraza} coordinator and campaigns officer until March)
Rozana Isa (study tour, evaluation and planning and strategic consultation coordinator)
Farida Cheryl Faizal (programme assistant for December)

\textbf{Polygamy lead researchers}
Prof Norani Othman (Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia)
Dr Shanthi Thambiah (Universiti Malaya)
Prof Dr Rashidah Shuib (Universiti Sains Malaysia)

\textbf{Interns}
Azza Basarudin (PhD Researcher, University of California, Los Angeles, USA)
Lynette Coleman, (Post-Graduate Bachelor of Laws and Legal Practice, Flinders University, Adelaide, Australia)

\textbf{Volunteers}
Students from Sunway College who helped to catalogue books and newspaper clippings (Sept – Nov 2006)
“SIS has helped many women all over the world to be confident and to claim their rights while staying intact with their identities and religious traditions.”

Roya Rahmani
National Human Rights Activist Award Winner, Afghanistan
Getting Involved

SIS is a constant hive of activity. We strive to provide a bright and cheerful volunteer environment, and welcome those who share our vision and commitment to make this world a better place, in big and small ways. Volunteers help to accompany SIS clients to court, monitor court proceedings, assist SIS campaigns and at outreach activities, and catalogue books and newspaper clippings.

If you have the right experience or a willing spirit we welcome your help in research, writing, editing, filing, cataloguing, fundraising, legal advice, website management, and public outreach events. If you just want to show your support for SIS and its work, become a Friend of SIS (FOSIS) for just RM50 a year.

Call our Operations Manager Rashidah Hashim at 03-7785 6121, drop by our office at 7, Jalan 6/10, off Jalan Gasing, Petaling Jaya, or email us at sistersinslam@pd.jaring.my.

Our volunteer and FOSIS forms are also available on our website at www.sistersinslam.org.my
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Funders
Friends of Sisters In Islam

Notes
‘For Muslim men and women, for believing men and women, for devout men and women, for truthful men and women, for men and women who are patient and constant, for men and women who humble themselves, for men and women who give in charity, for men and women who fast, for men and women who guard their chastity, and for men and women who engage much in God’s praise, for them God has prepared forgiveness and a great reward.’

Surah Al-Ahzab, 33:35
Mission Statement
To promote an understanding of Islam that recognises the principles of justice, equality, freedom, and dignity within a democratic nation state.

Objectives
To promote and develop a framework for women’s rights in Islam, which takes into consideration women’s experiences and realities.

To eliminate injustice and discrimination against women by changing practices and values that regard women as inferior to men.

To create public awareness, and reform laws and policies within the framework of justice and equality in Islam.

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Knowing that SIS exists in an extreme world today gives me hope that the image of a moderate, accepting and nourishing Islam is possible, and what more powerful than the implementation by Muslim women! I love the open arms of the members of SIS and the inclusion of people from all walks of life. It is time that Muslims around the world accept the realities of a changing world in front of our eyes.

Rangina Hamidi
Women's Rights Activist in Afghanistan
Welcome to the first annual report of...

Sisters in Islam (SIS). For years we have sought to produce annual accounts of our activities, but time and human resource constraints have proven perennially problematic. This year, we were determined that the 2006 annual review would appear, no matter how late, and that similar reports will appear with regularity every year thereafter.

What makes this report special is the story of SIS in the first chapter. We have given numerous interviews over the years to researchers and journalists who have wanted to know why and how we were formed. Here at last is the official story, but there are details and personal journeys that we have not included for lack of space. Perhaps these will appear in a special anniversary report, or in a future book on SIS.

2006 was a particularly challenging, yet rewarding, year. It opened with the Joint Action Group for Gender Equality (JAG) which includes SIS—embroiled in a controversy over the discriminatory amendments to the Islamic Family Law. The issue, however, generated a heartening amount of public and media support for the law. The issue, however, generated a heartening amount of public and media support for the law.

The year thus saw a significant expansion of the international component of SIS’s work. Given the rise of political Islam and its impact on the status and rights of Muslim women in most Muslim countries, as well as Muslim minority communities in the West, the demand grew phenomenally for SIS to share its experience and strategies in working on women’s rights within the Islamic framework.

In August 2006, SIS organised a groundbreaking inaugural short course on ‘Understanding Islam from a Rights Perspective’, which brought together 14 Muslim women leaders representing organisations and networks from 11 Muslim countries. The course was designed for women leaders already well-versed in gender and human rights principles, who also wished to understand Islam better in order to make their advocacy for women’s rights more effective and holistic.

The demand for our two-day training programme on ‘Islam and Women’s Rights’ also expanded to include the participation of foreign visitors on study tours to Malaysia. SIS conducted briefings and training for visiting activists, political and religious leaders and public officials from South Asia, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Zanzibar. Through this networking, some groups abroad have taken on the task of translating our question-and-answer booklets on issues such as equality, domestic violence, polygamy, and family planning into their local languages for use in their own contexts.

The passion with which SIS and its allies championed the causes of justice and equality in the name of Islam also led to the consolidation of conservative opinion. Reactionary groups launched campaigns against what they perceived as the evils of ‘liberal Islam’—campaigns that included open hostility directed at SIS and its associates in public forums, mosques, and demonstrations. And the publication of books such as ‘Islam Under Siege’. Two issues in particular, espoused by old and new Islamist groups, caused concern for those working for a more just society: Bahaya Murtad (the danger of apostasy) and Bahaya Islam Liberal (the danger of liberal Islam).

Regrettably, these attacks found echoes in the UMNO General Assembly in November 2006. However, SIS and its friends in broader civil society and human rights movements—particularly the Article 11 coalition—remained unmoved throughout. The Prime Minister’s closing remarks at the general assembly, expressing concern on the growing intolerance and ‘ultra-conservatism’, went some way to douse the inflammatory language and sentiments raised. The English-language media (and online news portals) rose to the occasion by highlighting the dangers of this kind of hate language and mob mobilisation tactics used to silence dissenting voices.

Opposition towards SIS in 2006, therefore, created valuable opportunities to widen the public space for discussion of urgent issues of concern. The extremism displayed by the ultra-conservative segments of society served as a wake-up call to many quiescent Muslims and Malaysians and helped them perceive the dangers of this kind of hate language and mob mobilisation tactics used to silence dissenting voices.

Federal Constitution and a preservation of the social contract that has recognised a rightful and legitimate place for every Malaysian regardless of race, religion, and opinion. This is the basis of our hope for change—that in the end, a more democratic and just Malaysia will provide the impetus for a more democratic and just Islam.

Zainah Anwar
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