Contemporary Matters Affecting Muslims Today

BARAZA!

A Sisters in Islam Bulletin

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Sisters in Islam: A Rendition of a Journey

sisters in islam

Empowering Voices For Change SIS FORUM (MALAYSIA) (266561 W) MUSLIM WOMEN SPEAK

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BARAZA! is a resource primarily for activists; policy makers; academics and students of law, Islamic and gender studies; and SIS funders and supporters.

It provides:
* a focus on contemporary matters affecting Muslims today, especially women's rights in Islam
* resources for reference

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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Sisters in Islam – A Model of 'Ilm (Knowledge)

I was captivated by Sisters in Islam (SIS) years before I formally joined in 2004 as its first male associate member. I first came across SIS through a television documentary during my university days as a Petronas scholar in Australia. This was in the thick of the political and economic crisis of the late 1990s.

The political homophobia and other human rights violations that were unleashed by the sacking of then Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim shook me to my core. I questioned what it meant to be a Muslim, a Malaysian, and a man who failed to fit stereotypical masculine and heteronormative ideals. But late one night, I sat riveted listening to the discussions by SIS founders screened on my student hostel TV in Melbourne – and I vowed to meet them one day.

When that day finally happened, it was part of a larger journey of (un) learning that took me beyond the most popular issues associated with SIS – tudung (Islamic headscarf), polygamy and domestic violence. Through the Klang Valley's NGO scene, I met and befriended several SIS activists who actively campaigned for refugee rights, press freedom, environmental justice, the rights of people with HIV, and the abolition of draconian laws, especially the Internal Security Act. My exposure to Islamic feminism was therefore always intersectional, holistic, and grounded in a grassroots-centred understanding of democracy and human rights. In my eyes, SIS embodied the Islamic concept of ***'ilm*** – knowledge and learning that is holistic, active, and justice-seeking.

My first workshop with SIS – as a participant in one of their public education programmes – blew my mind. Within two short days, I was exposed to knowledge and insights about Islam I never knew existed. This was just the beginning – it was through SIS that I cultivated my lifelong thirst for studying Islam for my own spiritual sustenance and to inspire my actions. I discovered, time and again, that making "room for the personal" and "lived experience", as recounted in this issue of Baraza, is a hallmark of SIS's work. This is what transforms knowledge into faith and action – in other words, it is ***'ilm*** at work.

'ILM IS A CENTRAL CONCEPT WITHIN ISLAM, MENTIONED REPEATEDLY IN THE QUR'AN. IN A NOTEWORTHY EXCEPTION TO THE QUR'AN'S EGALITARIANISM, 'ILM IS SINGLED OUT AS A MARKER OF PRIVILEGE, FOR EXAMPLE IN SURAH AZ-ZUMAR, VERSE 39:9 "SAY: 'CAN THEY WHO KNOW AND THEY WHO DO NOT KNOW BE DEEMED EQUAL?' ". A FAMOUS HADITH (RECORDED TRADITION OR SAYINGS) OF THE PROPHET MUHAMMAD, PEACE BE UPON HIM, EXHORTS MUSLIMS TO SEEK KNOWLEDGE EVEN IF IT MEANS GOING TO CHINA.

Furthermore, the Qur'an reminds its listeners that Divine revelation is not confined to recorded 'ayat' – the oral or written sacred text. Natural phenomena and the cosmos are also ayat or signs of revelation. This open-endedness led traditional Muslim thinkers and scholars to consider all forms of knowledge sacred, whether obtained through observation (***'ilm tajribi***), transmission (***'ilm naqli***), rational understanding (***'ilm 'aqli***), or empirical evidence (***'ilm al-yaqin***). The founders of SIS – social scientists, journalists, lawyers, feminist activists and theologians – and current staff and members all exemplify this multi-layered ideal of ***'ilm***.

Why, then, has SIS been the target of accusations of deviating from or distorting the true teachings of Islam? As suggested in this issue, it is all about SIS's privileging of lived experiences of injustice faced by Muslim women and other marginalised groups. In doing so, SIS exposes the political administration of Islam in Malaysia for what it is – a product of patriarchal, heteronormative and nationalist power.

It is no coincidence that SIS's most strident critics are also beneficiaries of this power structure. For example, the mass media that so often excoriated and continue to undermine SIS are controlled by male-led Malay nationalist or so-called Islamic political groupings.

Some criticisms of SIS can and must be taken seriously. Even I have questioned whether the Islamic feminism espoused by SIS is possibly too urban, elite, and deferential to state power. As recorded in this issue of Baraza, an early champion of SIS was after all an UMNO cabinet minister. During the organisation's formative years, SIS arguably enjoyed protection through its more high-profile members' close links to the Malaysian political establishment. Other human rights and social justice activists were not so lucky.

At the same time, many of SIS's rivals and critics can also be characterised as ideologically motivated political elites. The story changes, however, when people meet SIS members and staff personally and really understand their work. This is true even amongst SIS's most vocal detractors – I have seen this happen with my own eyes. This edition unsurprisingly reveals that SIS has many hidden and not-so-hidden supporters, from classically trained male Islamic leaders to Muslim women whose lives have been robbed by an unjust system – especially single mothers and victims of domestic violence.

SIS is also difficult to pin down from an international social movement perspective. It is too proudly Islamic for the comfort of many secular feminists in the Global North and Global South, yet not Islamic enough for those seeking to tokenize "ideal" Muslim women. Another highlight in this issue is therefore the rareness of SIS's DNA – as an explicitly Muslim organisation, it has always enjoyed mutual solidarity with other secular feminist groups in Malaysia.

Personally, SIS enabled me to live more purposefully and confidently as a feminist Muslim man who cares deeply about social justice. SIS exposed me not only to the works of Malaysian activists and scholars (Muslim and non-Muslim), but also the enduring lineage of justice-seeking Islamic scholarship worldwide, including by the luminaries mentioned in this edition – Amina Wadud, Abdullahi An-Naim, and Fathi Osman.

SIS is thus not only a model of ***'ilm*** but also the core Islamic concept of tawhid, or unicity of Allah. SIS opened my heart to the healing treasury of Islamic wisdom, and by following my heart I am now part of a global, grassroots movement of seekers of universal justice and equality. I am reminded of what Islamic scholar and mystic Jalaluddin Rumi wrote: "You are not a drop in the ocean, you are the ocean in a drop."

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Of Public Islam & Private Journeys

by ADRIANA NORDIN MANAN

Islam in public life in Malaysia ("public Islam") is both contextual and contested. Its role is largely accepted by society, its teachings seldom questioned openly, and its form reflects the power calculations that are rooted in national political configurations.

An extensive topic that subsumes questions of rights, belonging and the state-citizen compact in a complex multiethnic country, public Islam has also emerged as a major area of scholarly inquiry. This power-centred discourse — often viewing public Islam as a platform for power struggles to secure the support of the Malay polity — finds its home in journal articles, books and panel discussions in fields such as public policy, law, and political science.

Such cogent and critical analyses are welcome and important. However, there is also space for narratives embedded in the lived experience of Malaysians vis-à-vis public Islam. This is the undertaking here, in the story of Sisters in Islam (SIS), a key stakeholder in the evolution of public Islam.

When carrying out research for this article, one quickly notices the rich insights that can be gleaned by viewing SIS the organisation as a dynamic, living being that interacts and responds to its surroundings. The pressures, pivots and inflection points, often seen in the arc of a person's life, are also visible in SIS' journey.

IN MANY WAYS, SIS IS A MANIFESTATION OF DECISIONS AND ACTIONS BY ITS FOUNDERS AND THE EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP; ITS STORY IS ALSO A LENS BY WHICH TO VIEW MALAYSIA. PARTICULARLY, IT SHOWS HOW INDIVIDUAL CONCERNS RESPOND TO STATE IMPULSES WHEN CHISELLING PUBLIC ISLAM TO BETTER SHAPE THE POLITICAL CONFIGURATIONS MENTIONED ABOVE.

If the term "people's history" is one we can appreciate, the SIS story could be considered a "collective citizen's history". The collective assembles, identifies its purpose, and proceeds to build itself a structure that best realises its purpose. Like any sentient being, it meets and responds to the demands made upon it as time passes.

However, this article is not about SIS as an organisation becoming sentient to tell a story. The aim is not to project a faceless entity purely reacting to external forces. There is room for the personal narrative.

We hear from a few of the SIS founders who were there in the 1980s. Among the founders: a sociology lecturer at a public university; journalists at major national broadsheets; a feminist scholar of the Al-Quran; cultural managers; a visual artist; and a sexual and reproductive health rights advocate. After SIS was officially registered, its Executive Directors came from both the corporate and non-profit sectors.

It's likely that Malaysian readers who have kept up with national news in the past three decades would have lingering memories that associate SIS with contrarian, bordering on deviant, ideas on Islam. These words are not chosen lightly, for they depict the organisation's persona purposely painted by its detractors in the public sphere during those times. To do justice to the ups and downs SIS has faced, these moments are included here too, and always in the words of the women who experienced them firsthand. The space to share their perspectives was not often granted, especially by the local media, a courtesy extended sparingly and fleetingly.

By centring the personal experiences of those helming SIS during its different phases, we piece together a picture of women who, through their encounters with SIS, realised that they were working towards something bigger than their individual aspirations to lead fulfilling lives as Malaysian Muslims. The mission has always been bigger than themselves.

Through round after round of envisioning, executing and reflecting, the core SIS team wrote and continue to write a story that deserves to be known.

The Early Days

Kuala Lumpur in the 1980s was a city that could. It could be a home for many Malaysians from other parts of the country, during mass waves of rural-urban migration propelled by the increased work and study opportunities in the Klang Valley. It could be a place to work, play and unwind for a generation hungry to enjoy their status as the new consumer class, bundling themselves into rattling, pink "Bas Mini"s that tore along the city's main arteries and belched out passengers onto the streets of Chow Kit to attend a massive concert by the one and only Sudirman. It was an interesting time to live in a young nation that was not yet thirty years old.

But in one corner of the city, the air of possibility was supplanted by a sense of concern and urgency. Zainah Anwar and Noor Farida Ariffin were housemates who had welcomed a group of women to meet in their apartment living room. Under the banner of the Association of Women Lawyers — a non-profit organisation working on matters pertaining to women in the legal profession — a core team was convened to respond to an alarming pattern: distressed calls from Muslim women recounting the difficulty they faced in seeking redress at the syariah court in matters concerning family law. Among them were reports of the women, when dealt with unfair or ineffective divorce and nafkah (alimony) settlements, being told to "bersabar" (be patient) by the judges on their way out. It wouldn't be far-fetched to say that for many, the experience was harrowing and humiliating.

These developments were the aftermath of sweeping changes in Malaysia's judicial system initiated after Dr. Mahathir Mohamed became Prime Minister in 1981. The magnitude of these changes was so great that anyone who lived in the time before that would find it hard to recognise what the judicial system had become.

"DID YOU KNOW, BEFORE THAT MUSLIM COUPLES COULD OPT TO HAVE THEIR DIVORCE PROCEEDINGS HEARD IN EITHER THE CIVIL OR SYARIAH COURT?" NORANI OTHMAN, WHO WAS A PRINCIPAL FELLOW AND PROFESSOR IN SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION AT THE INSTITUTE OF MALAYSIAN AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES (IKMAS), UNIVERSITI KEBANGSAAN MALAYSIA (UKM) AND ONE OF THE GROUP'S MEMBERS, SHARES ON A BALMY AFTERNOON.

Echoing other informed analysts, Norani attributes the restructuring squarely to efforts by the government to project a more outwardly "Islamic" face, during a race for Malay political support between the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and major opposition party Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS).

But as a career sociologist, Norani wouldn't deign to ignore the wider social upheavals that impelled changes in the political sphere. The government had sponsored many students to pursue their tertiary education overseas, in an era when the Iranian Revolution of 1978 left ripple effects in the discourse on public Islam worldwide. Returnee Malay-Muslim graduates from universities such as Al-Azhar in Egypt and across the United Kingdom sought a more prominent face for Islam in Malaysian society.

"Now don't make the mistake of assuming that the more fundamentalist-thinking were only found among the likes of Al-Azhar graduates. Those from European countries were just as capable of holding such views, and some had even more fundamentalist leanings," she adds.

A journalist at the New Straits Times, Rose Ismail joined the group after hearing the troubling accounts by women while out covering stories.

The women mused: "How could this possibly be? Is this treatment towards women really what Islam prescribes? The same Islam we know and love as a core of our spirituality?"

These thoughts occupied their minds.

Returning to the Roots

During the meetings in Zainah and Noor Farida's living room, the group had a few criss-crossing ideas. First, they wanted to understand the whys and hows the implementation of Islamic family laws disproportionately harmed women. Second, how could they mobilise as advocates of women's rights under the law to highlight the stories they were hearing from the affected women, and advocate for change? The status quo was simply untenable.

As they pored over the laws and tried to reconcile what they believed was the true essence of Islam — justice — with the hardships faced by women in the courts which was anything but just, the same question kept coming up. It became apparent that the topic they were attempting to dissect was not purely legalistic. Their meetings changed into Quranic study groups. Everyone was welcome, however through the natural course of attrition (and understandably, the fact that deep diving into Islamic religious texts appealed more to Muslims), the group shrunk to an active core which included Zainah, Prof. Norani, Rose and Askiah Adam, a sociologist. Noor Farida meanwhile left the country to take on an overseas assignment. "After a while, all the lawyers left," recalls Zainah with a giggle.

> "WE FOUND OURSELVES ASKING THE SAME THING OVER AND OVER AGAIN: 'WHO IS INTERPRETING THE RELIGIOUS TEXTS THAT SHAPE THESE LAWS?'" SHARES PROF. NORANI. THE ANSWER, THEY SOON DISCOVERED, WAS ALWAYS A MATTER OF INTERPRETATION.

Prof. Norani attributes the work of Abdullahi An-Naim — a legal scholar known to bring questions of Islam into his research — as instrumental in sharpening her own thinking on Islam and justice.

Another scholar was Dr. Fathi Osman, a reformist Egyptian scholar of Islamic law, social change and modernity who the SIS founders would learn from a few years later, when he was a visiting professor at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) in Kuala Lumpur.

Anyone with a cursory knowledge of the Quran would know that understanding it is a science, its exegesis demanding guidance from scholar's rich with knowledge of the social and cultural context during the Quran's revelation.

One such scholar was Dr. Amina Wadud, a theologian and fellow founding member of SIS. First to befriend her was Rose during a fellowship at the University of Michigan in the 1990s, where Dr. Amina was completing her doctorate. While their children went on play dates, the two women sat down and talked. Rose the intrepid journalist made it a point to write articles for readers back home each time she travelled, and her conversations with Dr. Amina became the content for one of her articles on Islam in the United States.

As fate would have it, after completing her PhD, Dr. Amina accepted a job at IIUM. A chance encounter eventually paved the way for Rose and Dr. Amina to reconnect.

An expert in tafsir (interpretation), Dr. Amina's scholarly expertise in Quranic textual analysis from a woman's lens was interesting to the group. She could help point them in the right direction in their Quranic studies, and both speed up their learning and ground it within a more rigorous debate. They invited her over for one of their sessions.

"Things completely changed when Amina came on board. Before that, we were just a bunch of angry advocates," recalls Rose.

Revelations and Connecting the Dots

Thinking of gender representation had the group asking: where were all the women in the Quran? Dr. Amina attributed this to the social structures of 7th century Saudi Arabia, where men were the ones with the freedom to leave the home and play a public role in society.

And then came a more contentious question, regarding the permissibility of polygamy in Islam. "All our lives, we had been taught that polygamy was a man's right," shares Zainah.

"Our family members, ustaz and ustazah (religious teachers), they all taught us that as far as we needed to know, the final word was that men had the right to take up to four wives. Polygamy was taken as a given, with no conditions attached," Rose adds.

These internalised teachings were rocked to the core when Dr. Amina led the group to understand that in fact, the situation was a bit more nuanced. An-Nisa' ("The Women") is the fourth surah in the Quran. The references to polygamy as a right of Muslim men often quotes the surah's Verse 4:3:

> ***"If you fear that you might not treat the orphans justly, then marry the women that seem good to you: two, or three, or four."***

Less talked about was the fact that there was more to the verse. Dr. Amina enlightened the group as to the remaining parts of Verse 4:3:

> ***"If you fear that you will not be able to treat them justly, then marry (only) one, or marry from among those whom your right hands possess. This will make it more likely that you will avoid injustice."***

Describing the feeling when they first learnt this as "having been bamboozled by the ulama all this while," Rose pointed to a theme that would be a recurring topic in SIS' journey: How do Muslims learn to grasp and appreciate the distinction between religious decree, and culturally contorted decrees presented as immutable truth?

It was a question that they each grappled with in one way or another. But one thing was certain: things had changed. The group was more emboldened. Upon gaining more insight and self-assurance in what they wanted to say, they wondered how to make their views public. To them, it was important to present an alternative voice that spoke of justice, equality and compassion in Islam.

"As sociologists, Askiah and I insisted that beyond textual analysis, we needed to tackle the political and social issues that weighed upon Muslim women," Prof. Norani declares emphatically.

"I wasn't of the activist mould like Zainah, or the scholar like Prof. Norani. But because I was in journalism at the time, I sort of juggled both functions here and there. Dr. Amina led the way in research, and Zainah advocated a more public face for us," shares Rose.

Also a journalist, Zainah flexed her professional savviness in explaining their next step. "We wanted to share our views, saying that Islam is just and considers women equal to men in the eyes of the Creator. For sure, gaining access to the mosque network and taking to the ***mimbar*** to share our thoughts was out of the question. To put it plainly, we were women who didn't dress the part or have the qualifications expected of people allowed to speak publicly about religion in this country.

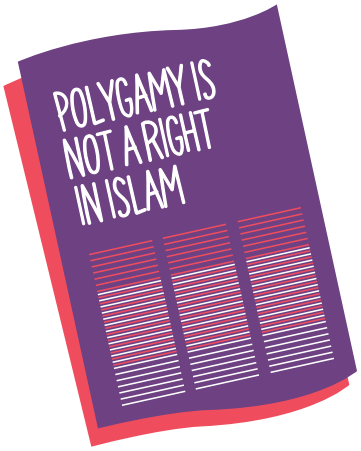
But, we did have media networks. The easy thing to do would have been to issue press statements. But then the editors would just extract parts they like for the write-ups. They wouldn't give a complete picture. So instead, we sent letters to the editor."

This was not as easy a task as one might imagine. There were hindrances, albeit the kind that were more discreet and delicate. "Many of the editors were conservative, Muslim men. We didn't expect them to support our cause. But we tried anyway," shares Prof. Norani.

Since the letters were their first step into the public sphere, were they not afraid of backlash? The vitriol can be cutting, especially toward outspoken women. "We didn't even think about what people would say," comes the cool answer by Prof. Norani.

"We signed off using a group pseudonym, so we were fine," Zainah offers. In hindsight, the hard times were simply yet to come.

Of Booklets and Increased Public Advocacy

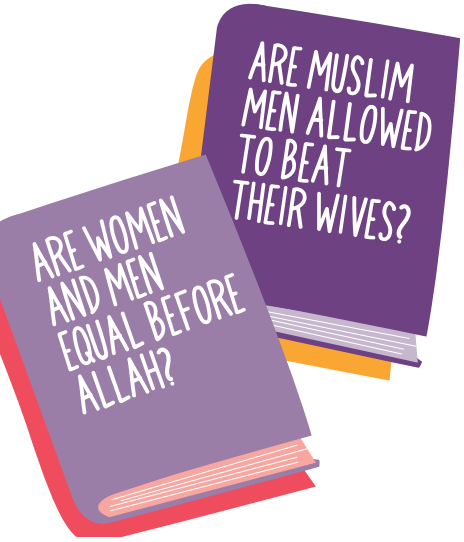


In 1990, the Selangor Syariah Appeals Court issued a judgement that brought polygamy into public attention. In the case of Aishah Abdul Rauf vs Wan Mohd Yusof Wan Othman, the court held that the husband did not have the right to take on a second wife, as he hadn't fulfilled the four conditions under Islamic Family Law that were in place to ensure justice in such instances.

The public debate that ensued was the right moment for the group to issue its first letter. The headline read "Polygamy is Not a Right in Islam". Searching for a name for themselves, they landed on "Daughters of Islam," after a group they had met at a women's meeting in Karachi, Pakistan, a few years before. First published in English language daily The Star, the letter was met with enthusiastic response and soon enough, competitor publication The New Straits Times expressed interest to publish it too.

There were a few conditions though. Under their policy to publish fresh letters only, the newspaper asked the group to modify the contents and sign off with another name. And so "Daughters in Islam" became "Sisters in Islam."

In an encouraging turn of events, the letter was also published by two leading Bahasa Malaysia newspapers, Utusan Malaysia and the (Jawi script) Utusan Melayu. On the topic of names, the group used their Bahasa Malaysia name, Puteri Islam (Princesses of Islam). They used the name for a year, until they found out that it was already in use by another organisation. A well-known uniform body in primary and secondary schools, the organisation could be described as an Islamic-themed Girl Guides.



In 1990, SIS was not a registered organisation yet, but their public persona was taking shape. A second letter to the editor, this time on women and leadership, courted controversy among certain parties and caused concern on how public the group members wanted to be, moving forward. A decision was needed fast, as they had just produced two booklets which were due to be launched. Titled "Are Women & Men Equal Before Allah?" and "Are Muslim Men Allowed to Beat Their Wives?", the booklets were written in a Q&A format meant to dispel misconceptions prevalent in Malaysian society.

Shaken but not defeated, the women sought support from people they knew, and were pleasantly surprised to receive it from none other than the late Tan Sri Napsiah Omar, the then Cabinet minister in charge of women's affairs and a longstanding supporter of women's rights. Tan Sri Napsiah agreed to launch the booklets, which was followed by a one-day public forum. The response was beyond what the group had imagined, with over 200 attendees, women and men from civil society, academia, government, and business. For many, the forum was an encouraging sign that it was possible to speak of Islam in a way that resonated with their personal sense of fairness and justice.

The group also expanded. Rashidah Abdullah was intrigued to hear in passing about a group of Muslim women who were attending meetings with government officials at the office of the religious affairs department, located near the National Mosque. An Australian sexual health and reproductive rights expert who would go on to co-found four NGOs in Malaysia including SIS, Rashidah was keen to connect with fellow progressive Muslims as part of her spiritual journey after embracing Islam following marriage to her Malaysian husband.

If Rashidah was drawn to the group's public advocacy, Sharifah Zuriah Aljeffri was intrigued by their religious study. An artist acclaimed for her Chinese brush paintings, she always resonated profoundly with questions about Muslim women's rights and global justice. After finding out about the group's weekly sessions with Dr. Fathi Osman, she would head after work to their venue on Jalan Ampang, a short distance away from the United States embassy where she worked as a cultural manager.

SUCH WERE THE EARLY DAYS OF SIS, AN ASSORTMENT OF PERSONALITIES WITH A SHARED PURPOSE IN LEARNING ABOUT THEIR RELIGION AND ADVOCATING A MORE INCLUSIVE INTERPRETATION OF IT WITHIN SOCIETY. FOR THE FIRST 11 YEARS, THIS WAS HOW THEY FUNCTIONED. SIS ADVOCACY WAS CARRIED OUT ON THE SIDES OF THEIR CAREERS AND FAMILY COMMITMENTS.

When asked if they ever considered entering politics, Prof. Norani outright rejected the thought. "Why would we? We all had careers that meant a lot to us. I was a professor in a public university, and no way would I have given that up for politics. In fact, we once told a politician what we thought about politicians. That left him despondent.

"We were the nationalist generation. When we were in university, the British had left. Plus, all of us had spent time abroad, so the exposure was different. Remember, the modern preceded the post-modern," she shares, peppered with flecks of social science theory.

From a cohort of activists, they morphed into a registered stand-alone entity in 1998 after receiving seed funding from the Ford Foundation. Guided by Rashidah's wisdom in navigating the world of non-profit grant applications, they secured enough funding to rent a small office and hire a skeleton staff.

The joint Executive Directors were Zainah and Sharifah Zuriah, who had earlier resigned from her job at the embassy in a final act of protest over the actions of George Bush Sr.'s administration in the Iraq War.

"We'd each come in three days a week, with Wednesdays the overlap day," Sharifah Zuriah recalls. They had one administrative staff to support them. For their logo, SIS adopted one of Sharifah Zuriah's calligraphic paintings of the word Rahim. It means "merciful" in Arabic and perhaps not coincidentally, "womb" in Bahasa Malaysia.

The Repertoire Expands

Prominent as Islam was in SIS' name and deed, SIS never shied from the framework of non-sectarian democracy, human rights and justice. Driving this was the principle that their work towards a more inclusive Islam was inextricably linked to concerns about fundamental liberties and human rights for all. For example, SIS was a founding member of the Joint Action Group Against Violence Against Women (JAG), an umbrella advocacy group composed of women's rights NGOs from across Malaysia. (JAG has since been renamed the Joint Action Group for Gender Equality.)

In 2000, SIS took on work in public education, in addition to their existing focus on research and advocacy. They introduced a training module in women's rights in Islam and reintroduced the study sessions from before. Initially open to Muslim women only, the sessions later welcomed people of all genders and faith backgrounds. Focusing on women's rights in Islam, this were later expanded into two-day training programmes aimed at building a public constituency of supporters.

Three years later, SIS launched its service arm: a legal clinic offering counselling on matters pertaining to women's rights under syariah law. The majority of cases involved issues of divorce, polygamy, domestic violence, and inheritance. At present, it is widely known by its name Telenisa, a quasi-subsidiary branding given to a branch of SIS' work known to be more public-facing and service-oriented.

THE YEAR 2009 HERALDED A NEW CHAPTER THAT INSERTED SIS INTO THE GLOBAL CONVERSATION ON WOMEN'S RIGHTS UNDER MUSLIM FAMILY LAW. HERE, TERMINOLOGY IS IMPORTANT. AWARE OF HOW LANGUAGE CAN MOULD MENTAL LANDSCAPES, SIS PURPOSELY CHOSE TO REFER TO FAMILY LAW AS MUSLIM, NOT ISLAMIC. THE REASON FOR THIS WAS TO DISMANTLE THE NOTION THAT THE LAW WAS INHERENTLY ROOTED IN THE RELIGION, INSTEAD OF INTERPRETATIONS BY FLAWED AND FALLIBLE HUMAN BEINGS.

Musawah was launched at a global conference in Kuala Lumpur attended by around 250 women and men from 47 countries. Describing its cause as "fighting for equality and justice in Muslim contexts," Musawah was envisioned as SIS' platform for knowledge production and advocacy on gender justice under Islam. Zainah became its founding Executive Director, a development that signified a new chapter for SIS and brought leadership succession into focus.

Sharing a headquarters with SIS, Musawah gathers feminist scholars, activists and human rights defenders from around the Muslim world Its establishment is a significant achievement in its own terms, but when one considers that SIS didn't always have the support of fellow women's rights activists, it is nothing less than remarkable.

"At international meetings, Muslim feminists from other countries would say that we were doing things wrong by expecting success in our activism while working from within Islam. They had discounted that possibility and thought our attempts were regressive," shares Zainah, recalling the early days.

Echoing Zainah's observation, Dr. Amina adds another layer in understanding the cultural differences that informs attitudes towards religion among Muslim activists.

"We didn't have the language for it at the time, but SIS exemplified a sense of personal dedication and devotion to Islam that was particularly Southeast Asian. As a theologian, I noticed that in South Asia and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), government oppression and a web of structures that weigh women down have led many feminist activists to reject all attempts to work within the Islamic framework in effecting change. Islam was expressed solely through patriarchal interpretations. But in Southeast Asia, where societies have a more agrarian ecology where life repeats itself in cycles, more feminine expressions of Islam emerged. We didn't experience a need for an antagonistic relationship with Islam but we knew something was wrong with its public projection."

Baptism of Fire

Becoming the SIS Executive Director right after Zainah Anwar? No thank you. Those shoes are just too big to fill," replied Dr. Hamidah Merican when she was approached on the side of a Musawah conference in 2009.

A self-identified "rebel from birth" and friend of a few SIS founding members from way back, she had no issues reconciling any personal principles with the work SIS did. But, her career path was markedly different, and how could it be humanly possible for anyone to get up to speed on the subject matter and take up the mantle from Zainah? Perhaps Dr. Hamidah was not a women's rights defender in the traditional sense, but she was a skilled organisational development practitioner working in large multinational corporations. Course correcting and reorienting structures in an organisation were her bread and butter. Plus, she knew more about defending women's rights than she realised.

"When advocating for diversity and inclusion in the workplace, I found that women were a major underrepresented group. I covered the Asia-Pacific region, which gave me plenty of exposure to how different cultures treat women at work, and how we could advocate for better women's representation."

There was also that bit about defying expectations. As a visibly Muslim woman, Dr. Hamidah often turned heads, especially those with preconceived notions.

> *"I would report for work and people would be surprised that instead of Farrah Fawcett locks, I had on a hijab. They'd wonder if someone like me could advocate for the LGBT community, for example. But, I cleared their doubts soon enough."*

After some back and forth and artful negotiations by Zainah and Rose especially, Dr. Hamidah reported for duty as Executive Director in early 2009. She was a pioneer, as the first SIS Executive Director who was not also a founding member. Her main order of duty? To inject structure into the processes and procedures.

"When I arrived, SIS was, to no fault of their own, like an office mixed with a country club. It was typical of an NGO, where people begin as volunteers and only later transition into salaried staff."

Dr. Hamidah readily admits that she was "not well-liked" for the changes she introduced to working hours, job descriptions and performance assessments.

"I understand how hard it is to accept changes. Humans are not wired to embrace change so easily."

A change she never bargained for however, was one that thrust her into the limelight and illustrates how work as human rights defenders, especially women, can be punishing. As Executive Director, Dr. Hamidah was the face of SIS in its public engagement regarding matters of public interest. Given the nature of SIS' work, these topics are often divisive.

Case in point: the caning sentence meted out to Kartika Sari Dewi Shukarno for consuming beer in Pendakwa Syarie Pahang vs Kartika Sari Shukarno [2008] 1 MLRS 250. She was sentenced to six lashes, in a case that drew the furore of human rights groups but as is customary in Malaysia, was also operationalised by right wing groups to assert their desired face of public Islam.

AS THE PUBLIC FACE OF SIS, DR. HAMIDAH ISSUED STATEMENTS, TOOK ON INTERVIEWS AND SUBMITTED MEMORANDA TO OPPOSE THE SENTENCE.

IN RETURN, SHE RECEIVED DEATH THREATS AND WAS THE SUBJECT OF MULTIPLE POLICE REPORTS.

She was worried for her safety, and the impact on her teenage daughter. In hindsight she calls it her "baptism of fire", but at the end of the day, it simply wasn't what she had signed up for when she joined SIS.

However, support came swiftly. SIS staff, Board members and supporters came out in droves. Dr. Hamidah received top-tier legal advice, allies walked alongside her through the doors of Bukit Aman, and assurances by her state assemblyperson that her family would be cared for in case anything happened to her.

> *"Everyone said: 'Don't worry, Hamidah, we've got your back.' To which I said: 'Thank you, but who's got my front?'"*

While her attention was always aimed towards improving the structures and systems of the organisation, Dr. Hamidah recalls that the whole episode was a stress test of SIS' crisis response capabilities, and the results were not good.

"WE HAD TO RETHINK HOW WE HANDLED SUCH INCIDENTS. ONE THING FOR SURE, I STOPPED GRANTING INTERVIEWS. ESPECIALLY TO THE LOCAL MEDIA BECAUSE THEY ONLY WANTED TO 'CRUCIFY' US," SHE REFLECTS MATTER-OF-FACTLY.

Twelve years later, one memory lingers on in Dr. Hamidah's mind. When she turned up at Bukit Aman to give her statement to the police following the pile of reports lodged against her and SIS, she bumped into a family friend who worked in the police force.

Upon hearing Dr. Hamidah's brief explanation regarding the situation, the friend said in Punjabi, a language they share: "Don't worry, we'll take care of you."

That private exchange was a divine sign, Dr. Hamidah is sure of it.

Sisterhood saved the day.

Doing the Right Thing

This is the thing I wish the public knew before they rushed to judge us. SIS does good work, and people only realise this when they are in dire straits and need the help that SIS provides," Ratna Osman, Dr. Hamidah's successor declares during an online interview.

A syariah and law graduate from the International Islamic University in Pakistan, Ratna came to SIS after a career in an insurance broking house. One day after work, the single mother of three young sons asked her boys to choose one of two scenarios.

"Do you want Mummy to work a lot and have less time for us together but give you more toys, or do you want Mummy to spend more time with you, but give you fewer toys?"

Their unanimous choice of Mummy over toys set Ratna's plan in motion. She would exit the rat race and opt for a job with more fixed hours. As if on cue, an advertisement for an Advocacy, Legal Services and Reform Manager at SIS caught her eye. It drew her in with its request for the ideal candidate to have a background in Muslim family law.

Proving that the court of public opinion is a gavel that hits hard, Ratna did have misgivings about SIS, based on the little she had heard about them. Adding to that, a few people in her life advised her against working there. Some said she should outright reject any offer, while others said she could accept it but resign immediately should she discover SIS doing haram (forbidden) work.

"At the time, you could say I was more traditional and conservative. But during my interview for the position, the questions posed made me reflect deeply. I wasn't asked about my authoritative opinions on syariah law, but instead, asked to share my truest personal opinions. That was a first for me in any job interview."

After a few years as the Advocacy, Legal Services and Reform Manager, Ratna was promoted to Executive Director after Dr. Hamidah left SIS to set up her own organisational development consultancy and spend more time with her family.

> IF DR. HAMIDAH'S STARKEST ON-THE-JOB LESSON WAS THE PERSONAL COST TO A LIFE IN ACTIVISM, RATNA'S BIGGEST DISCOVERY WAS HOW NAÏVE SHE HAD BEEN TO THINK THAT WORK AT SIS WOULD BE LESS DEMANDING THAN HER CORPORATE JOB.

And the firefighting, it was relentless.

"We were still feeling the after effects of the Kartika case, and then there was the issue of hudud law, and the banning of our book (Muslim Women and the Challenge of Islamic Extremism). And in 2014, the Selangor government declared a fatwa against us. It was a lot!"

> IT WAS NO COINCIDENCE THAT THE HEAT FELT AT WORK BLAZED HOTTEST WHEN THE 13TH GENERAL ELECTIONS CAME ROUND. RACIAL AND RELIGIOUS ISSUES, OFTEN OF THE MOST VIRULENT VARIANTS, ARE A STAPLE OF ELECTION CAMPAIGNING AND THE STOKING OF PUBLIC SENTIMENT IN MALAYSIA. AND OUTSPOKEN NGOS ARE EASY TARGETS FOR THOSE LOOKING TO CONJURE A PUBLIC ENEMY.

In it all, the deepest loss brought about by the engineered chaos was the distraction from nurturing and growing SIS. Imagine the strategies, work culture enhancements, knowledge dissemination and outreach that could have taken place had resources been given the chance to focus and unleash their know-how.

And more importantly, how many women, children and men could have been eased of personal hardship.

Onwards from Here

Since November 2021, SIS has been leading a series of consultative sessions with syariah experts on pressing matters pertaining to marriage and family. The guiding data is the caseload of the Telenisa legal clinic, and the topics range from gender-based divisions of responsibilities in a marriage, the roles of marital wali and the different types of divorce proceedings.

It's a fitting example of SIS' work — responsive to societal concerns and armed with data that reflects on-the-ground realities.

For Rozana Isa, the current Executive Director, the expanse of work done by SIS is a source of pride.

"Looking back at my 20 or so years of being involved with SIS as a volunteer and then staff member, I've realised that we do so much... just so much. And the work resonates with many women's groups around the world. For example, in Indonesia we engage with the women ulama who work within a religious framework. Their work is significantly different from ours, yet because of our various touchpoints, they too are our counterparts."

THE ORGANISATION'S LINEAGE AS BEING WOMEN-LED, FROM THE GLOBAL SOUTH AND SOUTHEAST ASIA IS ALSO A BADGE OF HONOUR. BUT THE PUBLIC HAS NOT ALWAYS BEEN KIND, IN FACT IT HAS BEEN DOWNRIGHT ADVERSARIAL AT TIMES. IS THE SUCCESS OF SIS BECAUSE OF OR DESPITE MALAYSIA?

"You know, I can sense the support. Maybe in the difficult early years, it felt that most people were keen to give us a public flaying. But now, especially in the age of social media, the support is evident. It's there, I can tell."

Related to this is Rozana's belief that Malaysia can be home to all sorts of political persuasions and philosophies.

"Just as there is space for us, there is also space for those unlike us."

An ally and active collaborator of SIS is Datuk Ismail Yahya, the former mufti and syariah judge from Terengganu. Government religious officials are rarely the most outspoken of SIS supporters, but Datuk Ismail is clear on the organisation's positive qualities.

> *"SIS has done plenty of good work, and they are very thorough. Actually, society owes a lot to them, in revising the narrative on polygamy for example. They were the ones who started to speak up on our misconceptions on a man's right to polygamy. The rest of us came around much later."*

Another spirited supporter is Latifah Abdul Rahman, a beneficiary of SIS' work with single mothers. A few years ago, she was unperturbed by murmurs that a SIS-organised overnight workshop for single mothers was a so-called liberal ploy to reel her into any ideological orbit, and now considers SIS an important partner in her advocacy for the rights of single mothers.

"With the SIS team, you can feel how much heart they put in. They are empathetic, accepting of who we are and they fight for us. In my own experience, SIS helped me reopen a court case to demand restitution for maintenance from my ex-husband."

WITH MUSAWAH TAKING ON THE BULK OF SIS' PREVIOUS PORTFOLIO IN INTERNATIONAL KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION AND ADVOCACY, SIS HAS HAD SPACE TO EXPAND INTO OTHER AREAS SUCH AS ENGAGEMENT WITH YOUTH AND LGBT COMMUNITIES, ALONGSIDE DEEPENING TELENISA'S SERVICES. THERE IS ALSO THE WORK WITH SINGLE MOTHERS, AND WOMEN AFFECTED BY THE MUSLIM FAMILY LAW AND COURT PROCESS.

And if resources were not a hindrance, what would Rozana's wish list for SIS be?

"Definitely a plot of land, with a building that houses a learning institution."

One thing that shines through is the unshakeable bond and camaraderie.

"SIS to me is purpose, hope, and change," shares Rozana.

"It's a place of love and deep care. As an employer, it can offer and impart so much, as long as you're willing to learn," reflects Dr. Hamidah.

"I've stopped trying to convince naysayers of SIS' merits. The other day when a lady in my Quranic study group quipped that she was not a SIS supporter, I just nodded and said to myself: 'That's fine'," says Rose.

"I know better. And you know what I know? That there are instances where women, when walking dejectedly out of the courtroom, are pulled aside by court officials who tell them to approach SIS for help," she continues.

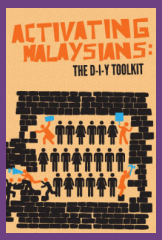
"I hope SIS never loses sight of what its purpose is. I wish for them to always do the right thing," goes the wish by Sharifah Zuriah.

It has been more than thirty years, and change is unmistakable.

"Nowadays I see all these younger groups doing similar things to what we do, and I feel so thankful. I feel less alone. It's not like the early days where it was just us being called unkind names," Zainah reflects.

The journey continues.

Recommended Readings



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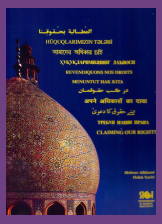

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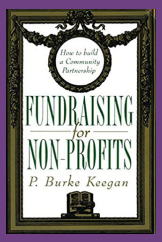

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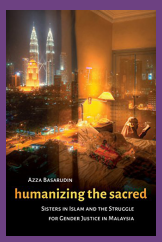

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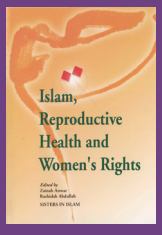

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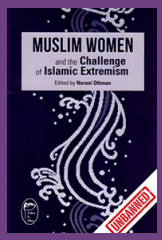

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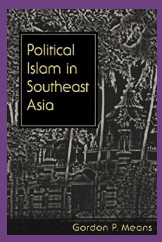

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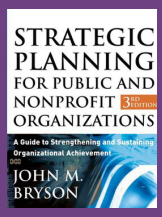

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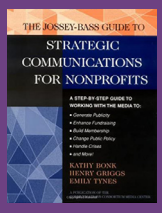

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