

True Picture on the Rights of Muslim Women

by: S. Masturah Alatas

Sisters in Islam is composed of eight professional women in Malaysia who have been studying and researching the status of women in Islam.

When Wan Mohamed Yusof Wan Othman's first wife went to the syariah court to prevent her husband from taking on a second wife, a group called **Sisters in Islam** played an important role in rectifying common misconceptions about the Quranic verses on polygamy.

"I wanted to know who the **Sisters in Islam** were," says Former journalist Puan Azah Aziz. "I wanted to stand up and say 'Bravo!'"

Just as they pointed out how polygamy is an abused practice and provided a more accurate and thorough interpretation, they are engaged with issues concerning male-female equality in Islam. They are questioning whether or not Islam allows a husband to physically beat or mentally harass his wife and what a wife should do in this situation.

"Many women don't know what to do and they just accept their lot in the name of Islam," says Puan Noraini Othman, an anthropologist at U.K.M. and a member of **Sisters in Islam**. "Others complain but they are told to be patient."

Othman says that among the most urgent problems facing Muslim women in Malaysia are those that have to do with the institution of mar-

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riage, such as divorce, polygamy and domestic violence. "Sometimes women do not get relevant advice from the various institutions, especially in rural areas," she says. "It is our hope that we can reach and counsel women in distress."

Sisters in Islam have just come out with two booklets: *Are Muslim Men Allowed to Beat Their Wives?* and *Are Women and Men Equal Before Allah?*

The booklets are especially helpful to Muslims who already know something about the texts of Islam and who are aware of some wrong being done to them in the name of Islam. They may want to refer to the booklets

for "proper" guidance.

"If Muslim women know their rights, they can handle their lives in a better way," says journalist Rose Ismail, also a member of **Sisters in Islam**. "If they are aware of their rights, they can educate the men."

"What is right should be recognized," adds Othman. "There should be no intrigue, no deceit."

The basic motivational and inspirational premise behind the booklets is that it is not Islam that oppresses women, but people who have failed to understand the true intentions of Islam and who have misinterpreted its texts.

To provide a more useful interpretation, **Sisters in Islam** systematically dissected those verses in the Quran that apply to women, looking closely at the words, the multiple nuances and ambiguities in their meanings, and how they have been misinterpreted.

Sisters in Islam aims to present basic information about Islam which includes a women's perspective. "Women's limitations are that they may not know some laws or facts. Men's limitations are that they are not always in touch with society and the cultural situation," says Othman.

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