

In the Name of God, the Infinitely Compassionate and Infinitely Merciful

*Hasn't the time come for the faithful
that their hearts in all humility
should engage in the remembrance of God
and of the truth which has been revealed,
and that they should not become like those
to whom revelation was given
but whose hearts have hardened
with the passing of time
so that many among them now rebel against that which is right?
Know that God gives life to the earth after it has been lifeless!
We have indeed made Our signs clear to you
that you might learn wisdom.*

[Surah 57:16-17]¹

Reflections on the WISE Gathering in Malaysia

~ Camille Adams Helminski

In mid-July, 200 women from 53 countries met in Kuala Lumpur for the second convening of WISE, the “Women’s Islamic Initiative in Spirituality and Equality.” We joined together, hand to hand to stand against violence in all its forms in the effort to establish greater peace and well-being for all in this world.

Hosted by our good friend Daisy Khan of the Asma Society, which gave birth to the WISE initiative, the four day gathering was filled with presentations by highly skilled and compassionate women who have worked hard in all corners of the globe to better the status of women, whether in health, education, marriage law, economic opportunity, journalism and the arts, or representation in religious realms, and spiritual deepening. I was blessed with the gift of offering the opening prayer and Qur’an recitation on the first full day of the conference. What a gift it was to look out at all these dear sisters who have worked so hard, and had come so far to join together in this effort. “*Surely with every difficulty comes ease.*” *Surah Inshirah* came deeply to heart.

Together with our dear sister Aisha Rafea of Cairo, we led a workshop in Spiritual Leadership, “Polishing the Mirror of the Heart” the next day as part of the afternoon training programs. It was such a joy to share in the remembrance of some of the powerful women leaders of our Ummah since its beginning, to open in meditation to the guidance of our Sustainer, and to share *zhikr* with such amazing sisters.

Some of the most precious moments were quiet conversations at meals or between sessions when we had the opportunity to hear more intimately about the work of our dear sisters, whether in Afghanistan or Indonesia, Iran, Pakistan, or Philadelphia, Hyderabad, Europe or Australia. Two beautiful young women from Afghanistan shared stories of gathering women in their homes for impromptu schools, at risk to their lives, during the years of the Taliban ban on education for women. Later during our final session, a representative from the Afghani contingent made a final plea for support of their continued work there . . . not for funds, as they said they had access to

¹ *The Light of Dawn, Daily Readings from the Holy Qur’an* selected and rendered by Camille Adams Helminski, p.159.

resources within Afghanistan, but for moral support which they greatly need to continue their struggle there for the abundant and rightful education of women.

Many stories were shared of the dire situation with marriage law in many countries where shariah law holds sway and has been interpreted for years in the most patriarchal and tribal ways. It was strengthening and empowering for these sisters to meet each other and gain ideas and tools for the rectifying of entrenched attitudes and legal processes. An aspect of this is the FGM² practice in Africa. A first pilot project of the Muslim Women's Fund established by WISE was to work to eradicate this practice by reorienting and re-educating those who practice it in Egypt, helping them to gain other sources of livelihood than to perpetrate this violence against young women, and a short film was shared by Daisy in documentation of this much needed healing work.

And the Women of Liberia, Women for Peace, what an inspiration . . . a stunning film by Abigail Disney, "Pray the Devil back to Hell," was shown on Saturday evening, reminding us all of the power of human beings to stand for Truth. These women joined together, Christian and Muslim, community by community, to stop the horrific violence in Liberia under the tyranny of Charles Taylor and the fractious war lords, and, at last, their non-violent determination to open peace succeeded. Hopefully, this film will become available through WISE. We strongly recommend it.

We are deeply grateful to the inspiration and hard work of Daisy Khan, Feisal Rauf and the Cordoba Initiative, and all the WISE team and its supporters for this opportunity to gather together to meet each other, to learn from each other, and to pledge to work together for Peace. Our gathering closed with music . . . the heart-felt lyrics of our spontaneous MC, Samina Ahmad, whose husband, Salman, of the well-loved band Junoon, had gifted the tune while I supplied the drumbeat as our African sisters rose to join us and circles upon circles of WISE women stood to honor the process that is deepening, heart by heart. And with a Fatiha and prayers our moments were blessed until the next gathering of WISE women, inshallah, in Morocco in June, 2010. Alhamdulillah! Meanwhile, efforts will be continuing to widen and deepen our network and to keep working together to stand for increasing equality for women and an end to violence in our homes, our communities, our nations, and our world.

The ongoing work of WISE:

WISE Compact and Jihad for Peace

Daisy Khan and the WISE team had worked hard in preparation for the conference to write a declaration of the rights of women which can be viewed on the new web portal at <http://wisemuslimwomen.org>

The fine-tuning of the wording for this and the statement of jihad against violence, jihad for peace will be continuing through the new web-portal.

A **Shura council** has been established to begin to address some of the issues of religious interpretation that work against the well-being of women, as well as to be able to respond to any issue that arises within the global community.

Muftiyya training

In relation to this effort, a scholarship fund is being established (as part of the Muslim Women's Fund) to aid in the training of female muftis so that a new era of religious interpretation might open

² FGM, female genital mutilation, a very traumatic procedure, tribal in origin which many wrongfully use Islam to perpetuate.

to ensure a more balanced interpretation in line with the original inspiration of the Qur'an which reawakened respect and honoring of the feminine and all of nature.

During the interfaith panel on the final day, Dr. Serene Jones, the new president of Union Theological Seminary in New York, and the first woman president of that institution since its founding 173 years ago, voiced her support of this muftiyya training program by offering to have the first such program be inaugurated at Union Theological seminary.

Muslim Women's Fund

A Muslim Women's Fund has been established to gather funds for support of women in all realms—economic, health, legal, and general education as well as support of religious leadership. This effort is being led by our dear friend, Sarwat Malik, and her daughter, Nadia, among others; more information about the fund will be appearing soon on the web-portal, during Ramadan, inshallah.

Web Portal

The new web-portal will be a worldwide resource of women for women by women. Biographies of all the WISE women will be posted there as well as articles and resources and links to their organizations throughout the world. Updates on all aspects of the WISE program will be posted there, and, inshallah, a mentorship program will be opening through the web-site to support others in their efforts toward peace and well-being for all women and men and children and creation as a whole.