A REPORT EXPLORING THE ROLE OF MUSLIM WOMEN’S LEADERSHIP IN THE MUSLIM WORLD

Research Locations: INDONESIA AND MALAYSIA

Research Duration: 10 weeks

Challenging stereotypes, changing perceptions: Muslim sisters doing it for themselves!
Acknowledgments

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**Introduction**

The interest in this topic came about as a result of the tragic death of Benazir Bhutto, a young, educated Pakistani woman, the first elected woman leader of a Muslim country, who was assassinated on December 27, 2007. A few months earlier myself and my family had the privilege of meeting Benazir at her book launch at Waterstones in Bradford. Two generations of my family went to see her, my mum, me and my two sisters and it was a meeting worth remembering. Benazir oozed a sense of self-confidence and charisma like I had never seen or experienced before, she had men pandering to her every need and want, and most of the women there were in awe of her. My initial thought was ‘wow’ finally a modern day Muslim woman that we can relate to, a role-model. Prior to this meeting, I had always found that for whatever reason, Muslim women around me lacked self-confidence, underestimated themselves, were often under-utilised and under-appreciated in the workplace despite their proven qualifications, talents and skills.

This meeting and news of Benazir’s death further fuelled my interest in the topic area of Muslim women and leadership, and so began my involvement and active participation in Muslim women’s groups and programmes related to the development of Muslim women in the UK.
**Background:**

There are at least 800,000 Muslim women living in Britain today, unfortunately many of them are not that visible or active in civic or economic life, especially where I come from, the city of Bradford. This is despite the fact that Bradford is home to the second largest Muslim community outside of London with over 80,000 Muslims living in the city, making up 19% of the total population of Bradford. According to the 2010 Equality and Human Rights Commission's report 'How Fair is Britain?' Muslim women have the highest unemployment rate of any faith-based group in the UK, the report claims that in some regions 75% are unemployed and over 40% have no qualifications. Muslim women in Britain also face additional barriers and challenges to their full and active participation in civic and economic life including the negative stereotyping of Muslim women, Islamophobia and discrimination based on clothing and faith. As such, many Muslim women in the UK don't have access to power, influence and opportunities to shape their communities and wider environments. What is more, this project was undertaken at a time in the UK when racial and religious discrimination and the associated rhetoric of 'Islamophobia' continue to challenge religious tolerance and community harmony. As the identifiable 'public face' of Islam, Muslim women are often the targets of this discrimination and public abuse. This is because the role of Muslim women is one that is prone to much discussion and assumptions; unfortunately the discussion is more often than not a negative one. The most common perceptions are of women living under the oppressive dictatorships of their husbands and fathers, forced into marriage, and of course suffocated under the veil. In terms of her contribution and role in society the caricature is one of the women restricted to five metres away from the kitchen sink.

**What Islam says about Muslim Women?**

There is a common misconception here in the UK that Islam or being 'Muslim' actually hinders the progress and development of Muslim women in the UK. In fact, Islam is the key to women's emancipation and liberation. Islam does not forbid women from seeking an education or from pursuing work. On the contrary, Islam encourages women to be educated, work, own property and engage in business. It has elevated the value and worth of a woman to an unprecedented status in society. A role model to Muslim women is Khadija, the wife of Prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him (PBUH), who successfully fulfilled the roles of a businesswoman, a wife and a mother. The Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) stated, "Women are the twin halves of men". Despite this, modern-day Muslim women have for too long been told they are worthless and not capable of expressing themselves on a political platform, the tide however is changing as more and more women in Pakistan, Indonesia, Egypt and Malaysia are expressing their views and concerns in a public arena; accounting rulers, having an opinion on educational and health matters. Muslim nations have even elected three women Prime Ministers, namely the late Benazir Bhutto of Pakistan, Khaleeda Zia (presently Shaikha Hasina) of Bangladesh and Tansu Cillar of Turkey. These individuals were elected by male and female voters on their abilities as capable human beings, not as women. These elections have demonstrated the true essence of Islam towards the role of women. It has refuted the distorted myth construed by social taboo that a woman's place is in the house, and that it is socially unacceptable and dishonourable for a Muslim woman to work. In her address to the Fourth World Conference on Women, Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto pleaded that "Muslim women have a special responsibility to help distinguish between Islamic teachings and social taboos spun by the traditions of a patriarchal society." Benazir Bhutto was one among many Muslim female leaders working to inspire and empower other Muslim women. Muslim women are part of British society; hence they have a key role to play in the development of British society.
Aims of the Fellowship:
The main aim of this fellowship was to research the role of women’s leadership development and the different strategies and actions that are being used to empower and advance the role and position of Muslim women in Malaysia and Indonesia.

As part of my research I also wanted to:

- Look at how you increase the role and representation of Muslim women in shaping community life.
- To look at how Muslim women can act as role models to inspire the next generation of Muslim women to be more active citizens in their communities and workplaces.
- To show the wider Muslim community positive examples of Muslim women/Muslim women’s organisations making positive contributions which will encourage Muslim and non-Muslim communities to invest time, energy and resources in trying to do the same.

Study locations:
The research focused on two countries; Malaysia and Indonesia; both of which have been hailed as the most progressive Muslim-majority nations in the world. In Malaysia and Indonesia women are today recognized as major contributors to development in these countries by holding powerful positions in the government and corporate world. To prove their commitment, their Governments have strategically planned the development of women in a structured manner. Various laws, policies and regulations were set forth in order to correct gender disparities and inequalities. In 2001 both countries governments set up Ministries dedicated to the development of women in each country. Each government has stated that it aims to have a 30% female representation in politics by 2015, as such, in order to achieve this goal a great deal of funding has been pumped into achieving this target which has created a great deal of activity, opportunity and creativity in this area of work.

It has also been said that in some areas, Malaysian women may fair even better than their counterparts in the west, where despite having a long history of feminism movement, we are still battling age old prejudices; stereotypes; Islamaphobia; and disenfranchisement. This study looked at organizations in Indonesia and Malaysia with projects or programs related to women’s rights and women’s participation in politics, governance and decision-making processes and asked them what they are doing that is making such a big difference to the increasing participation and progress of Muslim women in their countries.

I met with, interviewed, and work-shadowed a number of Muslim career women and feminist activists in Malaysia and Indonesia including managers and workers of NGOs, all of whom worked in the field of women’s development. The women involved in this research were known Muslim women leaders who were approached directly.
Key Findings:
The research provides a snapshot into the attitudes and opinions of key Muslim women leaders and selected Muslim women activists in Malaysia and Indonesia on how they are leading and how they perceive other Muslim women to be participating and contributing to the development agenda in their countries.

Clarity of vision:
Courage and clarity of vision was something that I saw in abundance on my travels. I met with Muslim women leaders and feminist activists who have the courage and confidence to speak out and challenge thinking on many taboo topics such as rape, domestic violence, patriarchy, women’s sexual/marital rights, sexual harassment etc. These women have a clear sense of self-confidence and a sense of purpose fuelled by their passion to help women in their communities and countries to achieve the same rights as men and to help women to realize and actualize their full potential.

With the organized NGOs like KOWANI\(^1\) in Indonesia and Sisters in Islam (SIS)\(^2\) and All Women’s Action Society (AWAM)\(^3\) in Malaysia their starting point with any new piece of work or project is to always create a vision that everyone buys into and to then set a series of steps and goals to achieve this vision. Their leaders created a vision and brought this vision to life through discussions, debate, diagrammatical illustrations until everyone in the organization and outside agreed the course of actions to realise that vision. The leaders of these organisations are feminist activists committed to improving the lives of women.

Both the governments Ministry for Women, Family and Community Development headed by women took on a similar approach by ensuring that it has clear policies and practical actions to realise the aspirations of their governments to achieve gender equality, and balanced and sustainable development in both Malaysia and Indonesia. These policies related to women’s development are brought to life by funding specific grass roots women’s development organisation’s to tackle the issues and barriers that prevent Muslim women from participating fully in social and economic life.

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1. KOWANI is a federation of nationally based voluntary women’s organizations established in 1928, and is situated in Jakarta, the capital city of the Republic of Indonesia. It obtained official recognition as one of the national machineries in the national mechanism for women’s full integration in national, regional, and international development.

2. Sisters in Islam (SIS) movement in Malaysia was established as a working group of Muslim feminist intellectual activists in 1988 and was officially registered in 1993, with a mission, “to promote the development of Islam in Malaysia that upholds the principles of equality, justice and democracy,” which also takes on broader gender-related concerns and questions that relate specifically to Muslim women. Through their publications, letter-writing campaigns, awareness generating forums and other activities, SIS has raised the level of awareness over issues related to Islam and Muslim women’s right in the country and beyond.

3. AWAM is an Independent feminist organisation committed to improving the lives of women in Malaysia.
Role-Models from the past and present:

The women I met had the courage and confidence to speak out because they all had specific role-models to whom they looked up to, usually these role-models were directors of their organisation’s, or female religious leaders (imaamas) who they were inspired by. The women I interviewed had also armed themselves with an arsenal of knowledge and examples of great women leaders from Islamic history, particularly citing examples of women leaders from Prophet Muhammads’ (PBUH) time.

‘Muslim women were given their freedom and rights over 1400 years ago – it’s men who took those rights away from us …. Just look at the example of Sakina, the great granddaughter of prophet Muhammad (pbru) who wrote her own marriage contract …this was unheard of at that time … we have such powerful examples… we just need to look at the wives of the Prophet (Aisha, Khatija,) to remind us that as women we have the right to speak out and to be heard…’

She goes on to say:

“Most Muslim women are familiar with Muslim women role models of the past. All of these women lived over 1400 years ago. I think that unfortunately, there has been little emphasis on modern role models for Muslim women of the present. Many books written for Muslim women are filled with information on Muslim women of the past. However, often we are left with the impression that Muslim women haven’t done much since the time of the sahabah. Muslims girls and Muslim women need to know that we have always made impacts in our societies and that we continue to do so. They need to know that we have not just been wives and mothers who are supportive of leaders, but that we have been leaders ourselves.”

It seems that the Muslim women I came across in my research took it upon themselves to ‘act’ as role-models for other Muslim women by proudly highlighting their achievements and highlighting the impact and difference they are making in their own lives and the lives of Muslim women in their countries. These Muslim women saw it as their ‘duty’ and way of ‘giving back’ something to society by inspiring confidence and leading the next generation of Muslim women to make their mark in their countries.

One of my interviewees Ras Adiba, was once one of Malaysian television’s top anchorwoman but her career suffered a severe jolt when she became a paraplegic in 2002 after a series of ill-fated accidents. Presently she is considered to be one of Malaysia’s top Muslim female role-models (she was one of four Malaysian role-models selected to be the Beijing Olympics 2008 torchbearers) making regular appearances in the media. I met Ras Adiba at the launch party of her new business venture and brand called Sporting RAS, where she launched a new range of sports and travel luggage. When asked how she feels about being portrayed as a disabled Muslim female role-model she replied:

‘its an honor, many Muslim women don’t get the attention they deserve, I just do my bit to show the disabled community that having a disability doesn’t actually prevent you from achieving your dreams, and that’s what I’m doing, living my dreams by doing what I love.’

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4 Role-Model article on Ras Adiba: http://thelondon2012.blogspot.com/2008/02/four-malaysian-role-models-selected-for.html

5 Sporting RAS launch in KL: http://www.nst.com.my/nst/articles/5ef74/Article
Muslim Women and the Media:

I found that the media in both Indonesia and Malaysia tended to play a key role in identifying and promoting Muslim women role-models. Unlike Britain, the media in Indonesia and Malaysia presents a more rounded portrayal of Muslim women and provides a clearer and more complex picture of Muslim women’s ‘real’ lives. The term islamaphobia didn’t feature in the lives of my research participants and their countries media, which I found to be a refreshing change from how we are fed daily misguided and misrepresented views of Muslim women in British media.

Naturally, the media in Malaysia and Indonesia, but much more so in Malaysia inspired confidence and a real sense of pride in Muslim women as you often saw Muslim women of all shapes, sizes, ethnicities, practicing and non-practicing being accurately represented in the media. It wasn’t uncommon or odd to see a news presenter wearing the hijab (Muslim woman’s dress) or taking part in sports competitions like football which are traditionally seen as male sports.

To add to this point, during my travel in Malaysia I read and heard so much about a forthcoming Islamic reality television show in Malaysia which aims to find the best women preachers and change conservative mindsets on the role of women in Muslim societies. The reality TV show, called “Solehah” (pious female), is to air in Malaysia and is a contest to find the best female preachers in Malaysia. Under Islam, female preachers are allowed but are uncommon. This show hopes to change that, and there is a good chance that it will, considering that Prime Minister Najib Razak has made strengthening the role of women in Malaysian society a priority. He has already appointed two female judges to the high courts, unheard of in most Muslim nations. One article I read stated:

“This seemingly simple act, a reality television show—may serve not just to further empower women in Malaysia, but Muslim women around the globe.”

This is how powerful the media can be. I found that Muslim women in the media in Malaysia and Indonesia held a very important and cherished role, the media were very sympathetic towards women’s issues and portrayed Muslim women in a very positive manner but again this could be due to the fact that many of editors and journalists are Muslim women who have the power and influence to run such positive stories. Another reason for this is that the women’s NGOs in both Malaysia and Indonesia are very pro-active, as soon as an article or story is published in the local or national media that is derogatory or undermining to women, these organisations come together using collective action and ‘bombard’ the editors with letters and dislike petitions until something is done to counteract there negative story, hence why much of the media is a little reluctant to get on the wrong side of these organisations because as one research participant so eloquently put it: ‘perceptions are as important as realities, that’s why we tackle the media so aggressively.’

Joint Action and Muslim Women’s Activism:

In Malaysia women’s organisations have been actively involved in joint action, advocacy and lobbying of issues pertaining to women and development for 19 years. It is their firm belief that changes and challenges can only be dealt with through a forward-looking strategic vision that empowers women to tackle their problems by collective will and joint action. I found that despite these women’s organisation’s having different missions and aims they always come together to tackle some of the more salient points related to women’s development and women’s rights. Sisters in Islam and All Women’s Action Society (AWAM) were two NGOs in Malaysia that formed the Joint Action Group for Gender Equality in Malaysia, and I worked with a similar group in Indonesia called KOWANI®.
I found that women's groups and NGOs in Indonesia and Malaysia have a long history of campaigning for amendments to laws that discriminate against women due to their religion and culture, perpetuating stereotyped gender roles and patriarchal attitudes towards women. When I asked the manager of AWAM how they have been successful at working together using joint action she replied:

“like me the leaders of these organisation's are feminist activists committed to improving the lives of women - we work for the cause, not the people, we have a commitment to the issue we are tackling and not to the loyalty of the people so it doesn’t create any friction between us.”

It appears that one women's organisation in the joint action group (JAG) will lead on a particular issue in the JAG and then all the other organisation's come together, collaborate, and share resources with the lead partner in order to tackle an issue related to women's rights. One research participant stated that:

“Prior to the formation of JAG we all served the interests of women in a fragmented way. Some women's organisations fought for equal wages and some for equal employment rights which excluded non-working women. In the 1980s a movement finally came together around the concept and reality of 'Violence-Against-Women' (the JAG) and this provided a new basis of unity and solidarity for women regardless of race, class and religion.”

When asked about some of the negative press attention the JAG receive for openly highlighting and tackling controversial women's issues (such as marital rape, domestic violence, sexual harassment, shariah law and women's rights) and their success in making a difference I got the following confident reply:

‘The hostility felt towards us, is a reflection of our success, as they (usually male politicians or conservative men) see us as a threat.’

Through their volunteer programme's these women's organisation's have successfully got Muslim women engaged in their work as community activists, as these organisation's strongly feel that certain problems affecting Muslim women in particular, such as that of female education and the fulfillment of women's rights, can only be effectively tackled by the initiative of Muslim women themselves, in co-operation with their male counterparts.

Many of the female activists (particularly the older generation) I met told me that in their organisation's they also have programs related to the development of young, fresh female activists. They provide leadership development training and one to one mentoring to this new generation of Muslim female activists who share the same passion and are equipped with the knowledge and skills to continue and enhance the work of the older generation of activists. In Malaysia this type of activity works through a government and charities funded initiative called 'fiesta feminista' a Malaysian initiative, about women making connections, exchanging ideas, and educating women about issues surrounding feminism, women's rights, development and democracy. It seeks to bring women together, women who share a vision for a just and equal society, free of all forms of discrimination, particularly discrimination against women.

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6 KOWANI is a federation of nationally based voluntary women's organizations established in 1928, and is situated in Jakarta, the capital city of the Republic of Indonesia. It obtained official recognition as one of the national machineries in the national mechanism for women's full integration in national, regional, and international development.
Public Education and Training:

All of the women I spoke to and the NGOs I worked with in Malaysia and Indonesia cited public education and training as core to their work. The women's ministry in both Indonesia and Malaysia has funded many women's groups and NGOs to take the lead in this area; to educate politicians, public servants and the public alike on the issues that affect Muslim women and how to effectively tackle them.

Sisters in Islam (SIS) and AWAM in Malaysia and KOWANI and Rahima in Indonesia have embarked on a wide range of programmes and activities that have been ground breaking in many ways and critical to the development of a progressive Islam that recognises women's rights and role as equal citizens and partners in all matters, and that promotes the principles of equality, justice, dignity and democracy in Islam.

The NGOS conduct seminars, workshops and trainings, they provide training for various groups of people who they feel are the right players in promoting human rights and gender equalities including hospitals, the police, government agencies, as well as schools, NGOs, and corporate companies. These NGOs also support study, research, and leadership training, to assist women in their pursuit of solutions to the critical social, environmental, health and economic problems facing their countries and communities.

The Muslim women's NGOS in Indonesia and Malaysia make it their priority to educate Muslim women about their faith. Women are encouraged to gather weekly for study of the Qur'an and discussion of issues that affect their lives. This education serves as the foundation for women's empowerment in decision making, both within the Muslim community and in mainstream society. They strongly encourage Muslim women to be involved in public school education and in politics, providing training and mentoring on public speaking, self-confidence, organisational skills, interfaith work, conflict resolution and stress reduction.

In Malaysia I was so impressed with the work of the Women's Ministry who have published a complete book aimed at young-people in secondary education on the United Nations international convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). The book is called 'Siti Aisha' which is provided freely to schools in an attempt to educate and empower young women and men through story-telling about their rights. Dato' Sri Shahrizat Abdul Jalil who is the current Minister of the governments Ministry for Women, Family and Community Development wrote as a foreword in the book:

“Siti Aisha is a book of character building to help you develop positive qualities in your life. Siti Aisha is the heroine in these stories. She is an intelligent, strong and kind girl who points out discrimination in an easy-going and open-manner. This book will help you to understand that girls should enjoy the same rights as boys according to CEDWA. Here we have used CEDWA articles which are relevant to you. These articles are made to show that all girls and boys are equal.” (Siti Aisha p 2. Published by the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development: 2008)

7 Rahima is a Muslim organization that advocates women’s equality based on modern and democratic ideas. Instead of traveling from conference to conference, Rahima members prefer to work at the grassroots level.
Muslim Women’s Networks:

In the UK the lack of a professional women’s network creates a major void for women aspiring to professional managerial positions. The absence of a female mentor-protégé relationship makes it difficult for Muslim women to develop the requisite attitude, skills and abilities for leadership and management positions. This results in a disparate situation and a state of confusion; because after all, women are entering a male dominated domain coupled with a traditional value system and a culture that tends to shun Muslim women from pursuing leadership positions.

Nevertheless, I was pleasantly surprised to find that in Malaysia and Indonesia the majority of women's NGOs I met with and the women I interviewed were all part of a network(s), be it a professional women's network or an informal women's social network. The women in their networks ‘clubbed together’ to provide mutual emotional, moral, educational support to each other in order to strengthen and empower Muslim women. One informal women’s group meeting I attended (set up in a home) in Malaysia was aimed at professional Muslim women, to help Muslim women boost their confidence and self esteem through Islamic teachings and promote sisterhood. When asked what this network does, one interviewee replied:

‘Our network allows Muslim women like me to connect with other women in the community to support, inform and help each other build our careers and lives in Kuala Lumpur – the majority of us are juggling work and family life and tend to neglect our spiritual development, this group is a reminder that Islam can help us get through it all, and do it all well.’

I found an abundance of professional women’s networks in Malaysia and Indonesia, within these networks I found educated, enlightened, and empowered Muslim women who I was inspired by. The women I came across were networking for power and change.
Conclusion

In conclusion this research found that the majority of Muslim women from Malaysia and Indonesia are active and involved in making significant impacts in broad areas of Malaysian and Indonesian social and economic life. As part of my fellowship I met exciting, energetic Muslim women from a wide spectrum of communities, NGOs and traditions across Malaysia and Indonesia. As ambassadors and role models, they are already making a difference by showing us what Muslim women are capable of and can achieve. However, real change in the UK cannot just be about national discussion and debate about the barriers and challenges facing Muslim women and their participation in public affairs, which there is a great deal of, it actually means making a practical difference at a local level too.

This report tries to give examples of the encouraging work that is already going on in Malaysia and Indonesia, where Muslim women are finding their voice, supporting each other, improving their skills, starting businesses, and learning to be leaders. I hope that these inspiring stories and examples will encourage many more people and groups to get involved and many more local authorities to think creatively about how they can support Muslim women in their communities.

In the UK there is too much attention to Muslim women’s appearance with perennial debate about headscarves and veils and too little around what Muslim women say, want and do. This must change. We have to get better at listening to Muslim women, valuing their contribution to this country’s economic, cultural and civic life, and opening the door for them.

Muslim women that are confident, empowered, and proud of what they can do for their communities: is already a reality for many Muslim women in Malaysia and Indonesia and this is what we need to aspire to achieve here for Muslim women living in the UK. By working together with Muslim communities, local authorities, education establishments, the media, and the private sector, we too can also make this a reality for Muslim women in the UK.
**Recommendations**

There are certain things that we can do to gradually build up a better understanding of empowerment of Muslim women, allowing Muslim women to have more share in decision making, a better position in British society, and to dispel some of the distorted myths about the role of Muslim women.

**Government**

There needs to be a concerted effort on the part of the government to analyse further or respond to some of the obstacles and barriers presented in this report with a specific plan or policy to support Muslim women's empowerment and development in British society. Recommendations for the government include:

- A key contributor to religious and social harmony is information and education about Britain's rich religious diversity and the impact that Muslim, particularly Muslim women have made on British society. To this end some government funding should be provided to a range of community organisations to undertake cross-cultural training about the role and impact of Muslim women in the UK, and also the delivery of religious and racial awareness training to break down stereotypes and prejudice regarding Muslims including women's dress codes.

- Of concern is the language used by some politicians and the way they address the broader community on issues related to Islam and Muslim women, which many Muslims feel are derogatory and inflammatory at times. Politicians and key figureheads need to be educated around the use of language and how it can influence and change public perceptions around Islam and the treatment of Muslim women in British society.

- A national media campaign should be undertaken to address stereotyping, prejudicial attitudes and discrimination against Muslim women and to promote positive images of the diversity of Muslim women and to 'normalise' their participation in British community life.

- Existing school based religious materials should be strengthened so as to familiarise teachers, career advisers and students with Muslim female role models of the past (from Islamic history) and present, this will instill confidence and empower Muslim women.

- At the national level, funds should be provided for a national consultative process to work towards a representative national body for Muslim women, to include all Muslim women's organisations and other Muslim women's representative groups within the community.

**Research**

- An extensive national research programme should be undertaken to identify the drivers and barriers to Muslim women's participation in British social and civic life.
Media

The media continues to be a major source of misunderstanding about Muslims. This is an issue that requires ongoing attention. Recommendations include:

- Consideration should be given to a major media campaign promoting positive images of the contribution of British Muslim women in our society,
- A positive step would be for practising Muslims wearing Hijab/beard to be recruited as news readers and presenters. This would help reduce Islamophobia.
- The just and reliable representation of Muslim women and Islam in the media is needed and it must also be fair and objective towards Muslims. There is a need for reliable reporters who are well versed with the Islamic belief system and cultures or Muslim women reporters who can understand their subjects.
- Muslim women should be given more opportunities in the media so they can represent themselves better.

Muslim Women and Muslim Women’s organisations:

The Muslim feminists and organisations I worked with in Malaysia and Indonesia formulated various strategies to promote Muslim women's rights and discussed certain recommendations which included:

**Networking:** Muslim women's groups in Indonesia and Malaysia have built alliances to promote their agenda. These women's groups engage with their local leaders, council officials in the larger civil society movement and in collaboration with the Joint Action Group for Gender Equality (JAG) push for reforms in the area of women's rights. In Britain, Muslim feminists/activists, Muslim women's groups and organisations themselves need to come together as a collective to affect change around Muslim women's rights and desire for equal participation at a local and national level.

**Reclaiming Islam:** Women's groups in Indonesia and Malaysia are at the forefront in engaging with religion and offering alternative views to challenge patriarchal and extremist interpretations of Islam. The approach that has been adopted by SIS and a majority of Muslim feminists, namely: going back to the primary texts (Qur'an, Muslims holy book) and Hadith (ways and teachings of the Prophet Mohammed (pbuh) in order to 'unread patriarchy,' proposing or doing ijtihad (interpretive reasoning), and providing an alternative reading of the texts. Muslim women and Muslim women's organisations in Britain need to educate themselves and the younger generation of Muslim women on their rights and duties based on rounded Islamic interpretations of the Quran and Hadith.

Building courage and confidence in creating a dissenting voice among Muslim women: Muslim women in the UK must be encouraged, trained and supported to speak out in order to claim their rights and to create the public space to engage with civil and social matters. Muslim women's organisations are in a perfect position to be able to deliver this type of training and development to Muslim women across Britain.

**Muslim women Role-Models:** The Muslim community needs to create a greater awareness of modern-day Muslim women role-models and the important role Muslim women can play within their communities. They can include Muslim women who have broken through barriers to go into non-traditional jobs and careers, without compromising their faith or culture. These organisations and individuals need to inspire the next generation of young Muslim women to follow their dreams and to realise their full potential. They need to present to the media these role-models and celebrate their achievements as a means of empowering Muslim women, changing the way they are perceived, and raising awareness about the inequalities that are faced by Muslim women in our society.

Working with the media: As a Muslim community ourselves we need to employ a number of media
strategies (e.g., issuance of letters to editors, presenting them with good news stories/role models, having weekly columns in the mainstream media) to generate a more informed public on Muslim women’s issues. Muslim women have to learn to create an active public sphere which involves being active in campaigning about issues that affect Muslim women and lobbying for equal rights. Writing and ‘pamphleteering’: Publishing easy-to-read, cheap and accessible publications on progressive Islamic ideas around Muslim women’s role and contribution is critical to make a dent in the market of literature that is currently dominated by ill-informed images and stories on Islam and Muslim women. Indonesian and Malaysian groups have been very successful in producing simple booklets on women’s issues in Islam, including the right to equality, and the issues of domestic violence, polygamy and family planning.

**Muslim women in the UK:** As Muslim women in the UK we have a responsibility to be more active and involved in our communities, because as a community we are often too reliant on ‘other people’ to set up initiatives and projects for us, and then we are disappointed when they are not quite what we need and want. What I saw in Malaysia and Indonesia were ‘sisters doing it for themselves,’ they set their own agendas for discussion and negotiation. They did this both individually and collectively. Here in the UK, individual Muslim women academics and activists alike can organise lectures and workshops to plan effective ways to empower British women socially and politically. Muslim women’s organisations can initiate collaborative projects with one another. As British Muslim women we are in a unique position to act as facilitators of many of these projects, since we are able to successfully bridge the cultural divide and be comprehensible to both worlds. As one feminist activist put it: “Outsiders cannot empower women: only women can empower themselves to make choices or speak out on their own behalf.”

All of these recommendations require a cooperative effort that should include women who are working for change in their own communities as well as engagement with government and social institutions.