

CHAPTER TWO

SISTERS IN ISLAM

2.0. INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, the researcher will explore the history of the organization known as Sisters In Islam, its founding member, its purpose of establishment, and its activities and programs.

2.1. BACKGROUND OF SISTERS IN ISLAM

Sisters In Islam (SIS) is a non-profit Malaysian organization that claims to be a group that advocates justice for women.¹ The organization was formed by several women who at the time were already involved actively in other organizations. These founding members wanted to prove that the suppression of women in Muslim societies does not originate from Islamic teachings, but rather from some interpretations of Islamic sources by men.²

The group's formation started in 1987 as a part of the Association of the Women Lawyers (AWL) when several women lawyers and their friends gathered to concentrate on problems relating to the implementation of certain new Islamic Family Laws that were enforced in that year. Composing of lawyers, academics, journalists, analysts and activists, they became a point of reference for women in difficulty seeking legal redress from religious authorities. This situation led to the formation of the core of what was to

¹ Rashida Khanam, *Muslim Feminism*, 7.

² Anna Spiegel, "Women's Organisations and Social Transformation in Malaysia: Between Social Work and Legal Reforms," in *Negotiating Development in Muslim Societies: Gendered Spaces and Translocal Connections*, ed. Gudrun Lachenmann, and Petra Dannecker (Lanham, MD/New York: Lexington Books, 2010), 71.

become Sisters In Islam (SIS) in 1989,³ and in 1993, they were registered as a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) under the name of SIS Forum (Malaysia) Berhad.⁴

Since SIS was established, SIS has garnered a lot of support from other organizations and important individuals in Malaysia and abroad. Fundings and support for SIS are from Malaysian individuals, corporations and international donors, including The Global Fund for Women, The Friedrich Nauman Foundation, The Ford Foundation, The Rockefeller Foundation, The Asia Foundation, and the British and Canadian High Commissions.⁵

According to Zainah Anwar⁶, SIS does not work alone but collaborates with other women and human rights organizations. With the help of these organizations, SIS actively voiced their opinions through letters sent to the editors of all major newspapers and the government.⁷

In an event, SIS and the Joint Action Group of Women Against Violence (JAGWAV) led a campaign to confront a few laws that the group claimed were biased against women. Together, they presented a proposal for the “Repeal of the Amendments to Islamic Law in Malaysia”.⁸ To this day, the Joint Action Group for Gender Equality (JAG) continues to support SIS.⁹

³ Zainah, and Shanon, *Sisters In Islam*, 2-4.

⁴ Ratna Osman (Executive Director, SIS Forum (Malaysia) Berhad, Petaling Jaya), in an interview with the writer, January 28, 2015.

⁵ Zainah, and Shanon, *Sisters In Islam*, 46-60.

⁶ Zainah Anwar is one of the founding members of SIS, and is a former Executive Director of the organization.

⁷ Zainah Anwar, “When Silence is Not Golden,” in *Contemporary Islam: Dynamic, not Static*, ed. Abdul Aziz Said, Mohammed Abu-Nimer, and Meena Sharify-Funk (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2006), 112.

⁸ Maznah Mohamad, “Politicization of Islam in Indonesia and Malaysia,” in *Gender Trends in Southeast Asia: Women Now, Women in the Future*, ed. Theresa W. Devasahayam (Pasir Panjang, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009), 107.

⁹ *Sisters In Islam Annual Review 2006*, 46-60.

Despite all of this, there are groups and organizations that do not and cannot accept SIS's ideas. According to these opposing parties, the alternative interpretations and solutions suggested by SIS are considered too liberal, too 'feminist', and controversial.¹⁰

Feminist', 'radical', and 'western' are terms that are usually used by some groups to label Sisters in Islam regarding their methods in interpreting Islamic sources, advocacy, and reform.¹¹ SIS also was embroiled in controversy when one of its founding members, Amina Wadud led Friday prayers¹² to a Muslim congregation that consisted of both men and women.¹³

Despite all the negative reactions from many individuals and groups that disagree with SIS, this organization still survives to this day. SIS still continues to hold activities and programs to ensure that its objectives are achieved. The following section is a detailed introduction to the founding members of Sisters in Islam.

¹⁰ Zainah, "When Silence is Not Golden," 113-114.

¹¹ Michael G. Peletz, "Islam and the Cultural Politics of Legitimacy," 252.

¹² Mary Zeiss Stange, Carol K. Oyster, and Jane E. Sloan, ed., *Encyclopedia of Women in Today's World*, Vol. 1 (Los Angeles, California: SAGE, 2011), 774-775.

¹³ Hillary Rodrigues, and John S. Harding, *Introduction to the Study of Religion* (Oxon, UK and New York: Routledge, 2008), 119.

2.2. THE FOUNDING MEMBERS OF SISTERS IN ISLAM

The founding members of SIS are Amina Wadud, Askiah Adam, Norani Othman, Rashidah Abdullah, Rose Ismail, Salbiah Ahmad, Sharifah Zuriah Aljeffri, and Zainah Anwar.¹⁴

2.2.1. Aminah Wadud

In 1952, Amina Wadud was born as Mary Teasley¹⁵ in Bethesda, Maryland, USA, into an African-American¹⁶ Methodist family.¹⁷ At that time, her father was a Methodist preacher, and she grew up in Washington D.C.¹⁸

She has five children.¹⁹ Wadud's first interest was in the field of education. At the time, she was told that "learning is not important". However, in high school, where she was surrounded by mostly Caucasian students, her grades improved spectacularly.²⁰

Wadud has stated that she often looks for tranquillity in life, and she went in to study the traditions of other faiths.²¹ However, in her search for transcended tranquillity, Wadud was introduced to Islam during her college years where she found the answers to the questions on the purpose of life which were answered in the teachings of Islam.²²

¹⁴ Edward E. Curtis, *Muslims in America: A Short History: A Short History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 76.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Farish A. Noor, "Reformist Muslim Thinkers in Malaysia. Engaging with Power to Uplift the Umma?," in *Reformist Voices of Islam: Mediating Islam and Modernity*, ed. Shireen T. Hunter (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2008), 281.

¹⁷ Amina Wadud, "Aishah's Legacy: The Struggle for Women's Rights within Islam" in *The New Voices of Islam: Rethinking Politics and Modernity: a Reader*, ed. Mehran Kamrava (California: University of California Press, 2006), 201.

¹⁸ Edward E. Curtis, *Muslims in America*, 76.

¹⁹ Mary Zeiss Stange, ed., *Encyclopedia of Women*, 1533.

²⁰ Asma Barlas, "Amina Wadud's Hermeneutics of the Qur'an: Women Rereading Sacred Texts," in *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'an*, ed. Suha Taji-Farouki, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 98-99.

²¹ Maureen E. Fiedler, ed., *Breaking Through the Stained Glass Ceiling: Women Religious Leaders in Their Own Words* (New York: Church Publishing, Inc., 2010), 74.

²² Asma, "Amina Wadud's Hermeneutics," 99.

During the second-wave feminist movement in the 1970s, she converted to Islam while still studying at the University of Pennsylvania²³ and adopted an Arabic name.²⁴

Wadud experienced a life as an African-American woman living in a community whereby white supremacy was practiced.²⁵ In that living condition, Wadud's family was deprived and lived in poverty as the community discriminated women.²⁶ The amount of discrimination that she faced as a poor and black female drove her to look for transcended tranquillity which she finally found during her college years when she was introduced to Islam.²⁷

She earned her degree in Education from the University of Pennsylvania. She went on to pursue her Master's degree in Near Eastern Studies at the University of Michigan. She then did her Ph.D. in Islamic Studies and Arabic at the same institution in 1988.²⁸ As preparation for her Ph.D. in Islamic Studies, Wadud went to Egypt to study Arabic where she uses the knowledge she gained in Islamic Studies to attain a reading of the Qur'an and its view of women."²⁹

After completing her Ph.D., Wadud became a lecturer at the Qar Younis University in Libya, the International Islamic University (IIUM) in Malaysia, and the Virginia Commonwealth University in the United States.³⁰ She joined the Department of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Heritage in IIUM between 1989 and 1992.³¹

It was when she was teaching at IIUM that she became involved with SIS and wrote several articles in pamphlets that highlighted, according to her, the Qur'an's

²³ Amina Wadud, "Aishah's Legacy," 201.

²⁴ Edward E. Curtis, *Muslims in America*, 76.

²⁵ Amina Wadud, "Aishah's Legacy," 201.

²⁶ Asma, "Amina Wadud's Hermeneutics," 98.

²⁷ Alexandra Samoleit, *Seminar Paper: Amina Wadud and Feminist Interpretation of Surah 4:34*, (Munich, Germany: GRIN Verlag, 2008), 4.

²⁸ Asma, "Amina Wadud's Hermeneutics," 100.

²⁹ Edward E. Curtis, *Muslims in America*, 76.

³⁰ Mary Zeiss Stange, ed., *Encyclopedia of Women*, 1533.

³¹ Edward E. Curtis, *Muslims in America*, 77.

support for sexual equality. Her seminal work, *Qur'an and Women* was also published during her service with the university.³² In 1992, a Malaysian press company published her book entitled *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*. The book was later republished by the Oxford University Press in 1999.³³

In 1992, Wadud accepted an appointment to teach in the Department of Philosophy and Religion at Virginia Commonwealth University.³⁴ “Women and the Qur'an” and “the patriarchal misinterpretation of the scripture” were her main areas of focus.³⁵

In Berkeley, she was also a visiting professor at the University of California.³⁶ She is also a visiting professor at the Center for Religious and Cross Cultural Studies at Gadjah Mada University in Yogyakarta, Indonesia.³⁷

Then, on the 18th of March, 2005, after delivering a *khuṭbah* (sermon), she led both Muslim men and women in congregational prayers held in New York.³⁸ Since no mosque would host the event,³⁹ she became the *Imām* for the Friday sermon involving a group of 100 women and men held in an Anglican church in Manhattan.⁴⁰

Wadud is also involved in many other women's organizations. She is the director of the Progressive Muslim Union (PMUNA), a leading Islamic Feminist group. She is

³² Asma, “Amina Wadud's Hermeneutics,” 101.

³³ Edward E. Curtis, *Muslims in America*, 77.

³⁴ Asma, “Amina Wadud's Hermeneutics,” 101.

³⁵ Alexandra Samoleit, *Seminar Paper*, 4.

³⁶ Samory Rashid, *Black Muslims in the US: History, Politics, and the Struggle of a Community* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 127.

³⁷ Mary Zeiss Stange, ed., *Encyclopedia of Women*, 1533.

³⁸ Asgharali Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam*, 3rd ed. (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd, 2008), 211.

³⁹ Edward E. Curtis, *Muslims in America*, 77.

⁴⁰ Alexandra Samoleit, *Seminar Paper*, 3.

also known as one of the most important figures of Islamic feminism.⁴¹ She has written extensively about Islam and gender justice.⁴² Among her books that have been published are *Qur'an and Women* (1999) and *Inside the Gender Jihad* (2006).⁴³

2.2.2. Askiah Adam

Askiah Adam is one of the founding members of Sisters In Islam (SIS).⁴⁴ She was a head of news and current affairs at Astro TV (1995 - 1996), and leader writer/columnist at New Straits Times Press, Malaysia (1995 – 2003).⁴⁵ In 1999, she was a Fulbright Scholar in Islamic Studies.⁴⁶

Between 2004 to 2005, she received the API Fellowship of the Nippon Foundation. She is also a freelance writer and researcher in fields related to women in Islam. Currently, her area of research is focused on 'Islam post-9/11, concentrating on the Indonesian experience'.⁴⁷ She is also a research specialist for The Institute of Strategic and International Studies.⁴⁸

⁴¹ Spiegel, Anna, *Contested Public Spheres: Female Activism and Identity Politics in Malaysia* (Heidelberg: Springer, 2010), 133.

⁴² Edward E. Curtis, ed., *Encyclopedia of Muslim-American History* (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2010), 473.

⁴³ Samory Rashid, *Black Muslims*, 127.

⁴⁴ "Askiah Adam", Blogger website, January 7, 2015, <http://www.blogger.com/profile/12102032823707958250>.

⁴⁵ "Askiah Adam", LinkedIn website, January, 7, 2015, <https://www.linkedin.com/pub/askiahadam/20/908/968>.

⁴⁶ "Askiah Adam", Blogger website, January 7, 2015, <http://www.blogger.com/profile/12102032823707958250>.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Doug Newsom, and Bob Carrell, *Silent Voices* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1995), 135.

2.2.3. Norani Othman

She is one of the founding members of SIS.⁴⁹ In 1973, Norani Othman earned her Bachelor of Arts (Second Class Upper) from the University of Malaya⁵⁰ with a degree in Sociology and Anthropology.⁵¹ She then earned her Master of Letters from the University of Oxford in 1981, and her Master of Philosophy from the University of Hull, England in 1977.⁵²

She was an Assistant District Officer and Deputy Registrar of Land & Mines in the Office of The Commissioner of Land & Mines in Johor from March 1973 to November 1973. She then became a tutor at the Department of Anthropology & Sociology at UKM (Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia) from November 1973 to 1976.⁵³

Afterwards, she went on to become a lecturer at the Faculty of Social Science & Humanities (FSKK), UKM from 1976 to 1998. Then she became an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Social Science & Humanities (FSKK), UKM from 1995 to 1998. She was also an Associate Professor and Senior Research Fellow at IKMAS, UKM from 1995 to 2006. From 2000 to 2004, she was appointed as the Deputy Director of IKMAS, UKM. Since 2006 and to this day, she has been a Professor and Principal Research Fellow at IKMAS.⁵⁴

Norani is an active woman, judging by her membership in various societies. She joined the Malaysian Social Sciences Society ‘PERSATUAN SAINS MALAYSIA (PSSM)’ and has been a life member since 1979. She was also a member of the Protem

⁴⁹ “Norani Othman”, *The Institute of Ismaili Studies* website, January 7, 2015, http://www.iis.ac.uk/view_person.asp?ID=126&type=auth..

⁵⁰ “Curriculum Vitae 2010 Personal Details...-UKM”, 5 September, 2013, http://www.ukm.my/ikmas_rg/eng/cv/norani_bi.pdf.

⁵¹ “Norani Othman”, *The Institute of Ismaili Studies* website, January 7, 2015, http://www.iis.ac.uk/view_person.asp?ID=126&type=auth..

⁵² “Curriculum Vitae 2010 Personal Details...-UKM”, 5 September, 2013, http://www.ukm.my/ikmas_rg/eng/cv/norani_bi.pdf.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

Committee, *Persatuan Sains Sosial Malaysia*, or PSSM (The Malaysian Social Science Association) in 1979, and an intermittent member of the Executive Committee: 1987-89; 1989-91, Vice-President in 1993-1994, 1999 -2002; Deputy President for the term of 1994-1996.⁵⁵

Since 2003, she has been a member of the Malaysian Studies Society, a society within the Association for Asian Studies Australia (ASAA). She was also a member of the Southeast Asian Association for Gender Studies (SAMA, Malaysian Branch) from 1991 to 2003.⁵⁶ Other professional positions and occasional appointments held by Norani⁵⁷ included:

- i. Membership in the International Editorial Board for *GLOBALIZATIONS*, ISSN1474-7731, (Journal published by Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group); 2007 – present.
- ii. Membership of the Programme Working Committee, Malaysian Aids Council Malaysia, from 2004 – 2008.

From 1998 to 1999 she was selected as an Academic Fellowship at the Institute for Advanced Study Berlin (Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin) in Germany. A year later, she became a Research Fellowship for AGORA Project at the Institute until 2000.

She was awarded a Fulbright Award (Fellowships for Islamic Studies) from October 1996 to December 1996 for research and a lectureship visit to Carnegie Foundation, New York, New School for Social Research, Harvard Law School, and the Law & Religion Programme, Emory Law School at the University of Emory, USA. During her service with Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, she was awarded an Award for Excellent Service (academic level) in 1998.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

She was also awarded with the gold medal in the Research & Innovation Exhibition Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia in 2003 (for Capturing Globalization Project), and a bronze medal in the Research & Innovation Exhibition Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia in 2004 (for Elections and Democracy Project).⁵⁹ Then in March 2006, she was appointed as the 2006 ASEAN Guest Scholar, Violet E. Wurfel Fellowship at University of Philippines, Diliman.⁶⁰

Her areas of expertise are Sociology, Islam and Politics, Gender & Human Rights, Gender Studies, Islamic Feminism, and Sociology of Muslim Societies.⁶¹

Among the researches related to gender she conducted are “*A Nationwide Study of Muslim Polygyny and Its Impact on Family life and Gender/Marital Relations (Peninsular Malaysia only)*”; 2007-2010, funded by the Lee Foundation, the Sigrid Rausig Foundation, and the SIS Forum, “*Islamic Feminism in Local and Global Contexts*”; 2008 – 2010, and “*Islam, Shariah Laws, Gender and Citizenship Rights*”; 2008-2009.⁶²

She currently works as an editor for a variety of publications,⁶³ including:⁶⁴

- i. Norani Othman, Mavis Puthuchery & Clive Kessler. 2008. *Sharing the Nation: Faith, Difference, Power & the State 50 Years After Merdeka*, Petaling Jaya: SIRD Publications (Gerakbudaya).
- ii. Tham Siew Yean, Lee Poh Ping & Norani Othman (eds.). 2008. *Community in ASEAN: Ideas and Practices*. UKM Press: Bangi.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ “Norani Othman”, *The Institute of Ismaili Studies* website, January 7, 2015, http://www.iis.ac.uk/view_person.asp?ID=126&type=auth.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

She is also the author of chapters in a range of books, among those chapters are:⁶⁵

- i. Norani Othman (2008) “Globalization, Islamic Resurgence, and State Autonomy: The Response of the Malaysian State to ‘Islamic Globalization’” in Joan M. Nelson, Jacob Meerman & Abdul Rahman Embong (eds.) *Globalization & National Autonomy: The Experience of Malaysia*; ISEAS Singapore & IKMAS: Bangi Publications.
- ii. Norani Othman (2008) “ASEAN Muslim ‘Faith Communities’: Their Transnational Networks, Cross-Border Movements and Regional Reach” in Tham Siew Yean, Lee Poh Ping and Norani Othman (eds.) 2008 *Community in ASEAN: Ideas and Practices*, Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia: Bangi.

She is also a writer of articles in several academic journals. Among her articles are:⁶⁶

- i. Norani Othman (2006) “Muslim Women and the Challenge of Islamic fundamentalism/ extremism: An overview of Southeast Asian Muslim women’s struggle for human rights and gender equality” in '*Women’s Studies International Forum*; 29 (2006) 339-353.
- ii. _____ (2000) “Capturing Globalization: Prospects and Projects” (with Clive S. Kessler) in James H. Mittelman and Norani Othman (Guest Editors) Special Issue, Capturing Globalization“ of *Third World Quarterly*. Vol. 21, no.6.

⁶⁵ “Curriculum Vitae 2010 Personal Details...-UKM”, 5 September, 2013, http://www.ukm.my/ikmas_rg/eng/cv/norani_bi.pdf.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

2.2.4. Rashidah Abdullah

Rashidah is an activist and an independent consultant in matters related to women's health, sexual and reproductive health and rights, women's rights and NGO organisational development.⁶⁷

In 1971, Rashidah obtained her bachelor's degree in Psychology and History from the University of Western Australia. In 1973, she furthered her studies and obtained a post graduate diploma in Social Administration from Flinders University in South Australia. She received her master's degree in Social Work (policy, planning and administration) from Western Michigan University (US).⁶⁸

Between 1994 to 2004, she became a member of the Editorial Board for Reproductive Health Matters Journal, UK. From 1998 to 2004, she was a member of the Foundation Council of the Global Forum for Health Research, Geneva. She is also a former member of the ISIS International Manila General Assembly. Amongst her activities include:⁶⁹

- i. Leading the conceptualisation, coordination and report writing of a number of national, regional and international research and evaluation projects.
- ii. Being the first national Malaysian involved in a study of domestic violence carried out by WAO (1990);

⁶⁷ "Rashidah Abdullah", *The Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women* website, January 7, 2015, <http://www.arrow.org.my/?p=rashidah-abdullah-2>.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

2.2.5. Rose Ismail

Rose Ismail is one of the founding members of SIS.⁷⁰ She earned her Bachelor of Arts in Political Science from Melbourne University, and obtained her Master of Science in Journalism from Boston University.⁷¹

She is co-founder of and is currently a director at the Centre for Strategic Engagement (CENSE) in Kuala Lumpur since May 2010. She was once an advisor for Salt Media Consultancy from January 2010 – March 2013 (3 years 3 months) and worked as a Managing Director from April 2005 – January 2010 (4 years 10 months). She was also an Editor of the New Straits Times from 1984 to 2003 (19 years)⁷² and is an ISIS Senior Fellow and Director of the Centre for Social and Cultural Research.⁷³

2.2.6. Salbiah Ahmad

Salbiah is one of those who initiated the formation of Sisters in Islam. The organization was formed in 1987 when she was teaching at IIUM. She was involved in holding a workshop entitled *Islam and the Modern Nation State*. She has also worked on two booklets about wife-beating and gender equality.⁷⁴

Salbiah left SIS in July 1997. She now works as a lawyer and is involved in campaigns for a law on domestic violence. She is currently taking part in a campaign for a law on sexual harassment in Malaysia. She works locally with the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Devt. (APWLD) and with the Women Living under Muslim Laws Network. (WLUML)⁷⁵

⁷⁰ “Ms Rose Ismail”, *CENSE (Centre for Strategic Engagement)* website, January 7, 2015, http://www.cense.my/?page_id=1172.

⁷¹ “Rose Ismail, Director, Centre for Strategic Engagement”, *Women’s Forum* website, January 7, 2015, <http://www.womens-forum.com/speakers/rose-ismail/732>.

⁷² “Rose Ismail”, *LinkedIn* website, January 7, 2015, <https://www.linkedin.com/pub/roseismail/b/35b/558>.

⁷³ “Trainers”, *Salt Media School* website, January 7, 2015, <http://210.5.44.12/~saltschool/index.php/trainers>.

⁷⁴ “Program Information”, *Islam and Human Rights* website, January 7, 2015, <http://aannaim.law.emory.edu/ihr/about.html>.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

Salbiah Ahmad studied law at the University of Singapore. She has been involved in many activities pertaining to matters related to women, religion and law, not only on a regional level, but also on a national level since more than 15 years ago. She has her column in a local news portal, Malaysiakini, where she discusses issues regarding democracy, human rights, law, and Islam. She is also involved in projects related to Islam and human rights.⁷⁶

As a law graduate, she is a legal practitioner of Shariah and civil law in Malaysia and Singapore. She was a lecturer of Islamic Family Law, Constitutional Law and Land Law at IIUM. In 2006, she was appointed as the Deputy Head of Office and Senior Gender Advisor to the Office of the UN Recovery Coordinator for Aceh and Nias (UNORC) in Banda Aceh, Indonesia. She has also worked with other organizations such as Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML) and the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD). Until 1997, she worked with SIS on contextualising the principles of convergence of Islam, Gender, Human Rights and developing reformation within the Islamic Framework.⁷⁷

2.2.7. Sharifah Zuriah al-Jeffri

Zuriah is a founding member of Sisters In Islam. She was born in Sungai Petani, Kedah in 1938. She received her early education at Father Barea's Convent School and the Sultan Abdul Hamid College in Kedah. She then furthered her studies in Law at Inner Temple, London where she completed courses in Roman Law, Constitutional Law, Legal History

⁷⁶ "Fellow Biographies", *Islam and Human Rights* website, January 7, 2015, <http://aannaim.lawemory.edu/ihr/biogr.html>.

⁷⁷ "Salbiah Ahmad", CEDAW South Asia website, January 7, 2015, <http://cedawsouthasia.org/resources/human-resources/k-s>.

and Criminal Law. She obtained her Diploma in Public Relations from the Institute of Public Relations Malaysia.⁷⁸

Between 1967 to 1969, she acquired the skills of painting in the Chinese brush style from Malaysian artist Anthony Sum. She held her first solo exhibition in July 1978, in which she showcased her expertise in Chinese brush paintings.⁷⁹

Zuriah has held nine Solo Exhibitions in Malaysia, the USA, Austria and Saudi Arabia, and has participated in group exhibitions in Malaysia, Brazil, India, Iran, the USA, Australia, Sweden and Thailand. She was elected to join The National Art Gallery's Board of Trustees in Kuala Lumpur (1998 – 2001) and was appointed with the role of Regional Representative for the Islamic Arts Foundation, London as well as coordinator and editorial board member of Visual Arts in ASEAN.⁸⁰ The logo of Sisters in Islam, RAHIM, is one of her paintings.⁸¹

Then her interests expanded to Islamic studies. During her stay in the USA, she was awarded with a Fulbright Scholar Programme in 1993 where she pursued an education in Islamic studies.⁸²

2.2.8. Zainah Anwar

Zainah was born in Johor. Her father is Tan Sri Haji Anwar bin Abdul Malik, credited as one of the people who named the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO). He was also a private secretary to Hussein Onn, who was the Minister of Johor during that time. Zainah's mother, Saodah bte Abdullah, is a housewife.⁸³

⁷⁸ "Sharifah Zuriah Al-Jeffri", *Art Accent* website, January 7, 2015, <http://artaccent.com.my/artist/sharifah-zuriah-aljeffri>.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ "Sharifah Zuriah Aljeffri | Malaysia", *Asia-Europe Foundation* website, , January 8, 2015, http://civdialogue.asef.org/index.php?option=com_viewall&.

⁸² "Ms. Sharifah Zuriah Aljeffri", *zoominfo* website, January 8, 2015, <http://www.zoominfo.com/p/Sharifah-Aljeffri/200197643>.

⁸³ "Zainah Anwar", *loot.co.za* website, January 8, 2015, <http://www.loot.co.za/product/lambert-msurhone-zainah-anwar/bfjf-1418-g590>.

In 1975, Zainah Anwar obtained her Diploma in Mass Communication (Journalism) from the MARA Institute of Technology in Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia. In 1977, she furthered her studies at Boston University and earned her M.Sc. degree in Journalism. Then, in 1986, she obtained her M.A. in Law and Diplomacy from Fletcher, Tufts University in Boston.⁸⁴

As a journalist and activist, she writes a monthly column on politics, religion and women's rights called "Sharing the Nation" in The Sunday Star, a mainstream Malaysian newspaper.⁸⁵

She gained many experience as an activist. She has worked as a Chief Programme Officer in the Political Affairs Division for the Commonwealth Secretariat, London; became a Senior Analyst at the Institute of Strategic and International Studies, Kuala Lumpur; and was a Political and Diplomatic Writer for the New Straits Times, Kuala Lumpur.⁸⁶

As the public face of SIS, she was chosen to become the project director of Musawah: For Equality in the Family. She has published a book entitled "*Islamic Revivalism in Malaysia: Dakwah Among the Students*".⁸⁷ She also delivers regular public talks on Islam and women's rights, politics and civil liberties on domestic and international levels.⁸⁸

⁸⁴ K. S. Nathan, and Mohammad Hashim Kamali, ed., *Islam in Southeast Asia: Political, Social and Strategic Challenges for the 21st Century*, (Pasir Panjang, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2005), 357.

⁸⁵ "Biodata of Zainah Anwar", *Sisters In Islam* website, January 8, 2015, <http://www.sistersinislam.org.my/news.php?cat.6>.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ "Zainah Anwar", *Global Experts* website, January 8, 2015, <http://www.theglobalexperts.org/experts/area-of-expertise/religion/zainah-anwar>.

2.3. THE OBJECTIVES OF THE ESTABLISHMENT OF SISTERS IN ISLAM

SIS questions “*if God is Just as Islam is just, why do laws and policies made in the name of Islam create injustice?*” The founding members of Sisters In Islam (SIS) set out to find the solutions to the problems that they claim Muslim women face due to inequality practiced supposedly in the name of Islam.⁸⁹¹³⁶ One of the objectives of Sisters In Islam is to eliminate what its members claim is discrimination against Muslim women in the name of Islam.

According to Zainah Anwar, some traditional religious authorities and Islamist political movements use religion to justify the repression of women in society and to defend their view that Muslim women are “substandard” to men. This is the very reason why some women’s groups in many Muslim societies oppose these groups.⁹⁰

SIS believes that the Qur’an has been interpreted wrongly by some men who use the text to justify discrimination against women. Thus, SIS set out to fight for gender equality from an Islamic perspective, with its members basing their arguments and ideas on their own interpretation of the Qur’an.⁹¹

SIS’s motto is “*Justice, Democracy, and Equality.*”⁹² As an established organization, it has its own vision, mission and objectives. Two of SIS visions are: to shape society so that it may “*be a progressive and democratic [one] that upholds the freedom of expression, gender equality and social justice for all*”; and “*to be recognized as the national and global leader for gender equality and justice in Islam.*”⁹³

⁸⁹ Zainah, and Shanon, *Sisters In Islam*, 2.

⁹⁰ Zainah, “When Silence is not Golden,” 107.

⁹¹ Ira Marvin Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 681.

⁹² Nayereh Tohidi, ““Islamic Feminism”: Negotiating Patriarchy and Modernity in Iran,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Contemporary Islamic Thought*, ed. Ibrahim Abu-Rabi’ (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 631.

⁹³ “Mission Statement and Objectives”, *Sisters In Islam* website, January 8, 2015, <http://www.sistersinislam.org.my/page.php?36>.

SIS's mission is "to promote the principles of gender equality, justice, freedom and dignity in Islam and empower women to be advocates for change."⁹⁴ According to SIS, the objectives of its establishment are:⁹⁵

- i. To encourage and promote a framework of the rights of women in Islam, which take into account what women go through in their lives. To do this, the experiences and realities of women's lives will be taken into account when promoting that framework;
- ii. To abolish inequality, injustice, unfairness and discrimination against women by changing the view of men being superior to women;
- iii. To enhance public consciousness and reform laws and policies within the framework of justice and equality in Islam.

Sisters In Islam (SIS) state that their existence is to champion the rights of women. Zainah Anwar claims that SIS is an organization that fights for liberation, truth and justice in Islam. As Muslims, she and her group members believe that they reserve the right to reclaim their religion, to redefine it, to participate and contribute to an understanding of Islam and how it is enacted and carried out by taking into account what women go through in their lives today.⁹⁶ Through this organization, the members of the group believe that they can reclaim the rights of women.⁹⁷

SIS is against some strict interpretations of texts related to Muslim family law.⁹⁸ Zainah Anwar believes that some male jurists and scholars have conquered the process of interpretation and codification of the laws. She says that this factor then can lead to the

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ Zainah Anwar, "When Silence is not Golden," 107.

⁹⁷ Asgharali Engineer, *The Qur'an, Women, and Modern Society*, (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd, 2005), 6.

⁹⁸ Craig A. Lockard, *Societies, Networks, and Transitions, Volume II: Since 1450: A Global History* (Boston, MA, USA: Cengage Learning, 2010), 925.

idea that males and females are different and unequal.⁹⁹ The members of the group disagree with some interpretations of Islamic law and praxis, claiming that the usage of these interpretations was suggested by some Islamist opponent groups and the state's religious bureaucracy.¹⁰⁰ They claim that some of these strict interpretations only take into account the opinions of certain people who, according to them, are closed-minded and cannot accept newer, modern interpretations that are up-to-date and more in tune with the realities of women's lives today.

Since SIS's objective is to promote a framework of women's rights in Islam that takes into account the experiences of women,¹⁰¹ SIS have stated that their aim is to interpret the Qur'an from an alternative point of view—the woman's.¹⁰² Zainah Anwar says that the struggle for Muslim women's rights must be in line with the living conditions of women in Muslim societies where lives are redefined by Islam.¹⁰³ She insists that present situations faced by women living in Muslim societies should be considered in their fight for equality and justice for Muslim women.

SIS has challenged the opinion that its members do not have enough credibility to express their views in topics related Islam. They claim that their organization does have members who are qualified to talk about Islam, to redefine it, to take part in it and to provide an alternative view of how Islam is codified and implemented. SIS claims that they seek to understand the primary sources of Islam in order to ensure that they have the right understanding of the religion. At the same time, they also claim that they equip

⁹⁹ Zainah Anwar, "What Islam, Whose Islam?: Sisters in Islam and the Struggle for Women's Rights," in *The Politics of Multiculturalism: Pluralism and Citizenship in Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia*, ed. Robert W. Hefner (Honolulu, USA: University of Hawaii Press, 2001), 230.

¹⁰⁰ Farish A. Noor, "Reformist Muslim Thinkers in Malaysia," 222.

¹⁰¹ "Mission Statement and Objectives", *Sisters In Islam* website, January 8, 2015, <http://www.sistersinislam.org.my/page.php?36>.

¹⁰² Ghada Osman, *A Journey in Islamic Thought: The Life of Fathi Osman*, (London/New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 224.

¹⁰³ Zainah, "When Silence is not Golden," 107.

themselves with information related to the issues that they discuss. They believe that they can contribute beneficial ideas to aid society in their fight for women's rights within a religious framework.¹⁰⁴

In Malaysia, amongst the groups that fight for human rights, SIS is among the more prominent ones.¹⁰⁵ Arkoun, Osman, and Naim are among the reformists that have inspired SIS, and they have motivated the group to provide new interpretations of Islam and Islamic law.¹⁰⁶ Amina Wadud, who supports the idea of gender equality within the Islamic faith,¹⁰⁷ is said to have provided new interpretations of Islamic teachings.¹⁰⁸

It has been mentioned before that SIS re-examines the application of Islamic measures in Malaysian society from time to time.¹⁰⁹ SIS states that the organization aims to provide support to women in distress who need their rights protected, and that the organization was established to reform laws and policies within the framework of justice and equality in Islam.¹¹⁰

According to Zainah Anwar, there are certain laws and policies that are unfair to women, and she has expressed how SIS plans to confront this situation.¹¹¹ She questions who the people that define what is lawful and unlawful are. She says that if those people claim to refer to Islam as a source of law and public policy to rule society, then who are

¹⁰⁴ Riham Ashraf Bahi, "Networking for Power and Change: Muslim Women Activism and the Transformation of Muslim Public Sphere" (Dissertation, Department of Political Science, Northeastern University) (Ann Arbor, USA: ProQuest, 2008), 158.

¹⁰⁵ Patricia Martinez, "Muslims in Malaysia," in *Islam and Human Rights in Practice: Perspectives Across the Ummah*, ed. Shahram Akbarzadeh, and Benjamin MacQueen (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2008), 139.

¹⁰⁶ John L. Esposito, "The Muslim Diaspora and the Islamic World" in *Islam, Europe's Second Religion: The New Social, Cultural, and Political Landscape*, ed. Shireen Hunter (Westport, USA: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2002), 251.

¹⁰⁷ Riham, *Networking for Power*, 159-160.

¹⁰⁸ Diah Ariani Arimbi, *Reading Contemporary Indonesian Muslim Women Writers: Representation, Identity and Religion of Muslim Women in Indonesian Fiction* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009), 11.

¹⁰⁹ Jamila Hussain, *Islam: Its Law and Society* (Annandale, New South Wales, Australia: The Federation Press, 2004), 20.

¹¹⁰ "Mission Statement and Objectives", *Sisters In Islam* website, January 8, 2015, <http://www.sistersinislam.org.my/page.php?36>.

¹¹¹ Colin Barlow, "Introduction," in *Modern Malaysia in the Global Economy: Political and Social Change Into the 21st Century*, ed. Colin Barlow (Cheltenham, Glos, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2001), 9.

the people who can claim that whatever they say is in accordance to Islamic perspectives or not?¹¹²

SIS has claimed that the organization is able to propose new alternatives to interpreting Islamic rules that involve women and gender,¹¹³ and the members of the organization have conducted many campaigns to accomplish its goals to safeguard the welfare and legal position of Muslim women in this country where marriages have been governed by state-sponsored religious bureaucracies.¹¹⁴ Family law is among the most important areas of law that SIS seeks to modify.¹¹⁵

Another objective of SIS is to increase public awareness.¹¹⁶ According to the organization, members of society need to be made more aware of women's privileges in Islam, and a community advocacy for the modification of certain Islamic law in Malaysia is needed. SIS has stated that community support and awareness are needed to make a difference, especially to Muslim Malaysians. Therefore, they have participated actively in enhancing education and awareness activities in Malaysia.¹¹⁷

The members of SIS have asked their younger friends to participate in their programs and meetings. SIS wants to produce young women who are capable of contributing and expressing their own views, and members of the group expect these young women to also gain knowledge from their more experienced members.¹¹⁸ Zainah

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 108.

¹¹³ Hussin Mutalib, *Islam in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008), 34.

¹¹⁴ Farish A. Noor, "Reformist Muslim Thinkers in Malaysia", 222.

¹¹⁵ Moghadam, Valentine M., *Globalizing Women: Transnational Feminist Networks* (Maryland, USA: The John Hopkins University (JHU) Press, 2005), 223.

¹¹⁶ "Mission Statement and Objectives", *Sisters In Islam* website, January 8, 2015, <http://www.sistersinislam.org.my/page.php?36>.

¹¹⁷ Shaikh, Sa'diyya, "Transforming Feminisms: Islam, Women and Gender Justice," in *Progressive Muslims: on Justice, Gender and Pluralism*, ed. Omid Safi (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2003), 158.

¹¹⁸ Sharifah Tahir, "Leadership Development for Young Women: A Model," in *Muslim Women and the Politics of Participation: Implementing the Beijing Platform*, ed. Mahnaz Afkhami, and Erika Friedl (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1997), 90.

Anwar once said that she “*work[s] from within, embracing Islam while also working to transform its practice*”¹¹⁹

In summary, SIS claims that the main objectives of its establishment are to promote a framework of the rights of women in Islam, abolish discrimination against them, enhance public consciousness and reform laws and policies within the framework of justice and equality in Islam.

¹¹⁹ Riham, “Networking for Power and Change,” 159.

2.4. THE ACTIVITIES AND PROGRAMS OF SISTERS IN ISLAM

SIS has run many activities and programs to achieve its vision, mission and objectives. With strong funding support, the organization conducts various activities and programs such as seminars, workshops, conferences, study sessions, public lectures, submitting letters to editors of major newspapers, issuing brochures and pamphlets, writing and publishing articles and books, lobbying, submitting memorandums and letters on legal and policy reform to the government, organizing forums, running training program and clinics, etc. SIS has already organized high-profile workshops and conferences in their efforts to achieve their goals.¹²⁰ SIS believes that through these workshops, activists, progressive Islamic scholars and policy-makers can sit together to find solutions to the various issues faced by Muslim women in this challenging new world.¹²¹ They've held conferences on Shariah laws, *hudūd* (Islamic criminal law) and Islam, reproductive health and women's rights, etc.¹²²

Besides conferences, SIS also conducts study sessions to hold discussions on important contemporary topics.¹²³ SIS's study sessions are not only open to Muslims, but also to non-Muslim men and women who want to engage in a variety of topics of contemporary concern. Women's rights in Islam, Islamic states, freedom of religion and the constitution are among the issues discussed in these study sessions. SIS also invites relevant specialists and experts to speak about certain topics. At the end of study sessions, a one-hour Q&A session is held for the participants to get involved in lively discussions with the speakers.¹²⁴

¹²⁰ Michael G. Peletz, "Judicial Process and Dilemmas of Legitimacy and Sovereignty: The Malaysian Case in Comparative Perspective," in *Sovereignty under Challenge: How Governments Respond*, ed. John Dickey Montgomery, and Nathan Glazer (New Jersey: Transaction Publisher, 2002), 238.

¹²¹ Zainah, "When Silence is Not Golden," 112.

¹²² Pnina Werbner, *Anthropology and the New Cosmopolitanism*, 98.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 98

¹²⁴ "Study Sessions", *Sisters In Islam* website, September 24, 2013, <http://www.sistersinislam.org.my/news.php?cat.118>, Sept. 24, 2013.

SIS states that it attempts to provide alternative solutions to the problems that arise in Muslim society. According to SIS, through the organization's Public Lecture Series, these progressive scholars are given the opportunity to engage with public participants in order to come up with alternative solutions to problems faced by Muslims today.¹²⁵

To achieve its purposes and objectives, SIS began their work by first studying the issues faced by Muslim women and by understanding the Qur'an. In the summers of 1993 and 1994, for instance, Dr. Fathi Osman conducted classes on the Qur'an and *fiqh* with SIS every week.¹²⁶ SIS states that the group then discusses the issues faced by Muslim women with progressive Islamic scholars in order to come up with alternative solutions.

According to SIS, the group also organized a public education program where they invited local Muslim scholars to participate in their programs and other progressive Muslim scholars from other countries to talk about current issues in Islam. SIS says that they hold monthly review sessions and also a series of public lectures in which they invite Muslim scholars from abroad.¹²⁷

In a conference, Zainah Anwar asserted that SIS has worked with qualified scholars who have the ability to think, feel and question what it means to be Muslim in this century.¹²⁸ According to the members of SIS, their organization has enough progressive Islamic scholars who work with them, including Fathi Osman, who often discusses Islam and Modernity; Amina Wadud who talks about Islam, the Qur'an and the Female voice; Abdel Rahim Omran who talks about contraception, abortion, and

¹²⁵ Zainah, "When Silence is Not Golden," 112.

¹²⁶ Zainah Anwar, "From Local to Global: Sisters in Islam and the Making of Musawah: A Global Movement for Equality in the Muslim Family," in *Gender and Equality in Muslim Family Law: Justice and Ethics in the Islamic Legal Process*, ed. Ziba Mir-Hosseini, Lena Larsen, Kari Vogt, and Christian Moe (New York: I.B.Tauris, 2013), 12.

¹²⁷ Riham, *Networking for Power and Change*, 159.

¹²⁸ Madhavi Sunder, "Keeping Faith: Reconciling Women's Human Rights and Religion," in *Religion and Human Rights: An Introduction*, ed. John Witte, Jr., and M. Christian Green (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 289.

reproductive genetic engineering; and Abdullahi an-Naim who discusses human rights, religion and secularism. These scholars also hold interviews with reporters on problems faced by Malaysian Muslims.

SIS claims that the group wishes to expose Malaysian people to new modern ideas in Islam contributed by these prominent progressive Islamic scholars who can provide Muslims with solutions to challenging issues.

SIS believe that more meetings and discussions with other activist organizations and government officials are needed in order to exchange ideas and to disseminate information to the public,¹²⁹ so they also network with other women's groups that have similar goals and aims. SIS says that their efforts give an opportunity for Muslim women to fight for their own justice and equality in controversial issues such as polygamy, domestic violence and freedom.¹³⁰

In its struggle for gender equality, the group found that public awareness is very important.¹³¹ The members of SIS want the public to know about their alternate Qur'anic interpretations, so one effective way of achieving this goal is to engage with the media.¹³² Thus, the group writes letters to the editors of major newspapers, issues brochures and pamphlets on the Qur'anic concepts of rights and the duties of men and women in the family¹³³, writes and publishes articles and books, and lobbies various kinds of issues. SIS believes that these efforts can help to create a society that is sensitive towards gender issues.¹³⁴ According to Zainah Anwar, SIS does not face many problems when it comes to getting their articles published in mainstream newspapers in Malaysia.¹³⁵

¹²⁹ Zainah Anwar, "From Local to Global," 123.

¹³⁰ Riham, "Networking for Power and Change," 158.

¹³¹ Michael G. Peletz, "Judicial Process," 238.

¹³² Thomas Banchoff, and Robert Wuthnow, *Religion and the Global Politics of Human Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 89.

¹³³ Daniel A. Bell, *Beyond Liberal Democracy: Political Thinking for an East Asian Context* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2009), 69.

¹³⁴ Michael G. Peletz, "Judicial Process," 238.

¹³⁵ Zainah, "When Silence is Not Golden," 112.

It is claimed that SIS is also dissatisfied with some of the courts' interpretations and decisions pertaining to Shariah law.¹³⁶ SIS constantly pressures the government to react to various legislative and policy measures so that the government is more careful when enacting laws related to women. The group wants the government to consider the sensitivity of gender issues before enacting any laws, especially those related to domestic violence.¹³⁷

The members of this organization have mentioned that they help Muslim women through their activities that involve sending memoranda to the government, lobbying Members of Parliament for change, and establishing NGOs.¹³⁸ The group believes that they are in leading the fight for gender equality, so they make it their mission to observe the state's performance.¹³⁹

SIS has asked the authorities to reform certain Islamic laws that have been practiced in Malaysia to ensure that women get equal rights to men. The group argues that many of the Shariah laws practiced in Malaysia are related to women. They insist that some of the existence of Shariah laws in Malaysia should be reformed, as the interpretations currently used are based on ancient (7th-8th century) interpretations and praxes of Islam. According to SIS, some of these old interpretations cannot be applied to women today, so certain Shariah laws in Malaysia must be reanalyzed and reformed so that they can be applied for the women of today. SIS wants women to be treated equally in court, especially when they are involved in cases related to domestic violence and polygamy.

¹³⁶ Ann Brook, *Social Theory in Contemporary Asia* (Oxon, UK and New York: Taylor & Francis, 2009), 103.

¹³⁷ Michael G. Peletz, "Judicial Process," 238.

¹³⁸ Vicki Crinis, "The Stratification of the Garment," 164.

¹³⁹ Spiegel, Anna, *Contested Public Spheres*, 224.

In a move that SIS believes can contribute to gender equality in court, the organization submits memoranda to the government asking for the appointment of more women judges so that there is a balance in what is usually a male-dominated area.

SIS has also asked Muslims in Malaysia to reflect deeply on the exercise of power on national and international levels in order to reduce gender disparities that they claim exist in the community.¹⁴⁰

SIS claims that their most important advocacy work is their interpretation of the Qur'an based on the concepts of equality and justice. According to SIS, some local conservative religious authorities are biased against women. Thus, SIS wants to provide alternative interpretations of the Qur'an that can be used to solve controversial issues that arise in today's society, without discriminating women.¹⁴¹ SIS claims that the group has attempted to reinterpret the Qur'an and comprehend the teachings of Islam in relation to the needs of modern day Muslims. This is why SIS conducts ongoing research and has a publication agenda that they claim is based on the need to reformulate the received Islamic traditions.¹⁴²

SIS says that it often organizes national and international forums to deliberate on important issues in Islam. Through international forums, SIS can share and exchange their ideas with other organizations from various countries around the world.

Among the issues that have been discussed in these forums are: "*Islam and the Modern Nation State; Islam, Reproductive Health and Women's rights; Islamic Family Law, and Justice for Muslim Women.*"¹⁴³ To SIS, these issues are crucial, and need to be discussed in this challenging era so that new solutions can be discovered to help Muslim women in this day and age.

¹⁴⁰ Farish A. Noor, "Reformist Muslim Thinkers in Malaysia", 222.

¹⁴¹ Riham, *Networking for Power and Change*, 159.

¹⁴² Anthony J. Langlois, *The Politics of Justice*, 59.

¹⁴³ Zainah Anwar, "When Silence is Not Golden," 112.

“Musawah” is an initiative of Sisters in Islam (SIS Forum Malaysia) at the international level. Zainah mentioned that in March 2006, the inspiration for Musawah¹⁴⁴ (‘Equality’ in Arabic) was first proposed at a SIS International Consultation on ‘Trends in Family Law Reform in Muslim Countries’ in Kuala Lumpur. SIS says that the group invited Muslim activists and scholars from South-East Asia, Turkey, Morocco, Iran, Pakistan, The United Kingdom, and the United States, to exchange knowledge and strategies.¹⁴⁵

For the book ‘Wanted: Equality and Justice in the Muslim Family’, Zainah compiled several papers that were presented by participants who attended the Musawah meeting. According to her, this book explores the beginnings of Islamic family law and aims to discuss how Muslim scholars during the time of classical *fiqh* traditions constructed Muslim family laws in the past. The book also aims to explore how resources within *fiqh* and Qur’anic verses on justice, compassion and equality can support reform to strengthen family relationships.¹⁴⁶

In the book ‘Wanted: Equality and Justice in the Muslim Family’, it argues that equality and justice within Islamic traditions, international human rights and constitutional frameworks are both possible and necessary for women and men in the Muslim world today. According to them, Muslims have to reclaim the diversity and dynamism that were so integral to Islamic legal tradition, and the book intends to encourage Muslims to think constructively about the changes and reforms that are needed to maintain equality and justice in contemporary Muslims societies.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁴ It is an initiative of Sisters in Islam (SIS Forum Malaysia).

¹⁴⁵ Zainah Anwar, “Paper: Introduction: Why Equality and Justice Now,” in *Wanted: Equality and Justice in the Muslim Family*, ed. Zainah Anwar, 2.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.

There are seven papers presented in Framework for Action. It is claimed that the writers of the book ‘Wanted: Equality and Justice in the Muslim Family’ used a holistic approach to bring together the teachings of Islam, the principles of general human rights, basic rights and constitutional guarantees, and relate them to the real lives of contemporary human beings.¹⁴⁸

Other than that, SIS has declared that the organization has started a training program on women’s rights in Islam. The aims of this program is to train grassroots service providers, human rights lawyers, student leaders and young professionals who are considered crucial opinion makers.

SIS has strategies for a certain groups of people in order to achieve its aims. The organization says that they want to produce a module on Women’s Rights in Islam, so every month, they hold training courses that focuses on young people, students and professionals, journalists, human rights lawyers, young politician leaders and grassroots service providers.¹⁴⁹

In May 2005, SIS opened a legal clinic to help society understand the problems that arise from patriarchal prejudice in the understanding of Islamic texts.¹⁵⁰ Through this clinic, the organization provided free legal counseling sessions to those who wanted to know about their legal rights in Shariah and civil law. The legal clinic operated on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays, every week from 10.00 a.m. to 5.00 p.m..¹⁵¹

As an organization that claims to fight for equality and justice, SIS takes part in broader-based events not only in Malaysia, but also internationally. According to the members of this group, they also conduct public lectures on issues related to Islam,

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁴⁹ Zainah Anwar, “From Local to Global,” 113.

¹⁵⁰ Lee, Julian C. H. , *Islamization and Activism in Malaysia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2010), 100.

¹⁵¹ “Telenisa”, *Sisters In Islam* website, September 24, 2013, <http://www.sistersinislam.org.my/news.php?item.443.19>.

delivered by famous local and international scholars as well as activists and religious leaders.¹⁵² SIS states that the organization networks with:¹⁵³

- i. Important government ministries and institutions, such as the Ministry of Women, the Ministry of Law, the Islamic Development Department, and the Attorney-General's chambers;
- ii. NGO's, particularly women's groups and human rights groups;
- iii. Traditionalist women's groups and Islamist groups

The exchange of ideas and strategies on national and international levels has played an important role in their work, and they do this not just through conferences and forums, but through print media and internet usage.¹⁵⁴ SIS has established their own website that can be accessed by the global community.¹⁵⁵

Based on the activities, programs, and networking efforts mentioned above, SIS can be categorized as an organization that is very active in promoting its objectives to achieve its aims.

¹⁵² "Introduction of Events", *Sisters In Islam* website, September 24, 2013, <http://www.sistersinIslam.org.my/news.php?cat.116>. ²⁰⁰ Zainah, "When Silence is Not Golden," 113.

¹⁵³ Zainah, "When Silence is Not Golden," 113.

¹⁵⁴ Suad Joseph, and Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Encyclopedia of Women & Islamic Cultures: Family, Law, and Politics* (Danvers, USA: BRILL, 2003), 675.

¹⁵⁵ Maila Stivens, "Family Values' and Islamic Revival: Gender, Rights and State Moral Projects in Malaysia," in *Gender and Islam in Southeast Asia: Women's Rights Movements, Religious Resurgence and Local Traditions*, ed. Susanne Schroeter (The Netherlands: BRILL, 2013), 165.

2.5. CONCLUSION

The chapter concludes that the founding of SIS was traced to a certain law that its members were dissatisfied with after the implementation of new Islamic Family Laws enforced in 1987. This situation led to the formation of the core of what was to become Sisters In Islam (SIS) in 1989, and the group was registered as a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) under the name of SIS Forum (Malaysia) Berhad in 1993. The founding members of SIS consist of eight women. According to SIS, their objectives are to promote a framework of the rights of women in Islam, abolish discrimination against them, enhance public consciousness and reform laws and policies within the framework of justice and equality in Islam. Thus, SIS has run many activities and programmes to achieve its objectives and purposes with strong funding support.