



## **Islam and the Status of Women**

### **A lecture by Sharifah Zuriah Aljeffri**

**Presented by the Bob Hawke Prime Ministerial Centre, University of South Australia**  
*With the support of the Australia Malaysia Foundation Inc*

MS ELIZABETH HO:

As Director of the Bob Hawke Prime Ministerial Centre I would like to issue everyone here a very warm welcome on behalf of the Centre, the University of South Australia and the Australia Malaysia Foundation, which has supported this lecture.

#### **Acknowledgements**

I would also like to acknowledge that we are on Kurna land and offer our respects to traditional owners.

Sir Eric Neal, Patron of the Hawke Centre and Chair of the Australia Malaysia Foundation and Lady Neal. The Honourable Dr Basil Hetzel, Chair of the Hawke Centre, and Pro Vice Chancellor Professor Michael Rowan, and our speaker Zuriah Aljeffri. Bob Fantozi from Gerard Industries, Carmel O'Loughlin, Office for the Status of Women, Linda Matthews, the SA Commissioner for Equal Opportunity, Bill Cossey, University of South Australia Council Member and State Courts Administrator, Glenys Jones, Vice President of the National Council of Women, Pam Ryan from Issues Deliberation Australia, Members of the SA Multicultural and Ethnic Affairs Commission, the Multicultural Communities Council, the SA Council of Churches, Amnesty International and the Muslim Womens' Association of South Australia.

I would like to issue thanks to Geoff Sauer, who is involved with the Foundation, and also Flinders University Alumni. Helen Stacey, who has hosted Zuriah over a number of days during her visit to Australia and, finally, Louise Carnell, my project coordinator in the Hawke Centre who has put together many of the practical aspects of this evening. A person who did not wish to be acknowledged was Jan Croker, who comes from the Bahai community and who kindly supplied our flowers this evening.

#### **Opening remarks**

We have a wonderful group of people here, a wonderfully diverse group of people, and in that context I would like to mention that we have the honour of having Nelson Mandela as our Patron. I know that he approves heartily of our commitment to celebrate diversity and to make that celebration part of our own community and the world at large, and likewise, our university.

There are a number of students here tonight and staff, and I would like to note particularly the work of Dr Zaniah Marshallsay, who is in the School of International Studies. She teaches the topic of Women in Islam within courses on Islam, politics and international relations, a post-graduate course, and also Islam Society and International Affairs as an under-graduate course, and that is I think just a brief indication of the commitment that this university has to encouraging intercultural understanding.

If you would like to become more involved in our centre we invite you to take a brochure with you and to join our mailing list. This will enable you to access our lecture program, our other activities and also those of the Hawke Institute and the Hawke Library ([www.hawkecentre.unisa.edu.au](http://www.hawkecentre.unisa.edu.au)).

I have great pleasure in firstly inviting Professor Alison Mackinnon to formally introduce our speaker. Alison was appointed the Professor of History and Gender Studies in 1997. She is currently the Director of the Hawke Research Institute, the Research Institute of the Bob Hawke Prime Ministerial Centre. Previously, she was Director of the Institute for Social Research and also Director of University Research Development and she is eminently qualified to introduce Zuriyah.

Thank you

PROFESSOR ALISON MACKINNON:

Thank you, Liz. I too would like to welcome you all this evening and to acknowledge that we are here on Kaurna land. Well, we live in difficult times internationally, where there is much talk about the clash of civilisations, to quote the famous work of Samuel Huntington, or even, "The end of history", as propounded by Francis Fukiyama. These debates and the catastrophic events of recent times are very divisive, separating people into "them" and "us", or "good" and "evil".

Usually, we are lined up with the "good", or with reason, and those who are not exactly like us are increasingly constructed as the "other", as "unknown", perhaps "unknowable". Just after September the 11th 2001, I attended a Conference of Womens' Historians in the United States, where the internationally famous US scholar, Joan Scott, was the plenary speaker, and I was reminded of her very strong words as I thought about setting the scene for what is to follow this evening. Scott argued that:

*"Feminism has taught us to analyse the operations of difference and the workings of power."*

We undertake analyses of the global and the local, looking for symmetries of power, for domination and resistance, and also for inter-penetration and hybridity for fusion. We question and reject stark binary ways of seeing the world, alliances of good against axes of evil, of Western secular rationalism against Islamic religious fundamentalism, modernity against primitivity, of State against the forces of unreason. All of these operations and oppositions we totally reject.

Feminist methodology has taught us to ask more and more about variation, difference and to reject any sort of formulations where we are presented with neatly contained oppositions, entities such as Western non-Western, they are more us. We have also learned, and Joan Scott has been one of the people who has helped us to do so, to acknowledge that there are very different feminisms, to accept the fact that "feminism" refers to a multiplicity of conflicting and often very different movements, thus, we are very keen to listen to other voices. Voices which are often silenced in our media and popular culture, lost to us in images which represent Islamic women as hidden, veiled and hence often voiceless. We are keen to understand and stand beside those whose ideas of culture and feminism are different but complementary to ours.

This valuing of cultural diversity is as Liz has mentioned, one of the key themes of the Hawke Centre and of the Hawke Research Institute. Thus, I come to my very pleasant task this evening, which is to introduce Sharifah Zuriyah Aljeffri. Zuriyah Aljeffri was born in Kedah, a State in North Malaysia where her father was the first Malay Principal, appointed to an English language secondary school. She had a very liberal education which combined Islamic studies with Western education. She studied law at the Inner Temple in London and has a Diploma in Public Relations from the Institute of Public Relations, Malaysia, so on that count she has a very wide background in law, public relations and cultural affairs.

Zuriah is also a renowned artist whose work has crossed the cultural divide in Malaysian visual art practice through the study and application of Chinese brush painting. In her works, Chinese brush technique, Arabic calligraphy and sign and image become acts of spiritual contemplation, or interpretation of socio political issues, so we might also say they are emblematic of hybridity of a fusion of cultures.

Her Bosnia series was exhibited at the Vienna United Nations Conference on Human Rights. As well as being a widely exhibited artist and arts writer, Sharifah Zuriah Aljeffri is also a founding member of the Sisters in Islam, an Islamic feminist organisation in Malaysia. Through her association with this key group, Zuriah has spoken in many international settings about the true principles of Islam and about women in Islam. Her talk this evening is titled: Islam and the Status of Women. Please join me in welcoming Sharifah Zuriah Aljeffri.

MS ZURIAH ALJEFFRI:

**Assalamu'alaikum** – The Honourable Sir Eric Neal, Patron of the Hawke Centre and Chair of the Australia Malaysia Foundation, the Honourable Dr Basil Hetzel, Chair of the Hawke Centre. Pro Vice Chancellor, Professor Michael Rowan, who opened our exhibition in 1998 here at Hillsmith Gallery. Professor Alison Mackinnon, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

First of all, I would like to thank several beautiful people who have made me possible to be here this evening. I would like to thank Sir Eric Neal, Australia Malaysia Foundation for organising my speaking engagements in Adelaide, Mr Robert Gerard of Gerard Industries for funding my trip here, Geoff Sauer, Louise Carnell and Elizabeth Ho for coordinating my program in Adelaide and to my friend, Helen Stacey, who has been instrumental of getting me here and also putting me into trouble sometimes.

I would like to begin my presentation with a prayer, followed by a little background about myself and then talk about Islam - the source is from the Holy Koran - and then talk about Sisters in Islam, how we evolved and how we go about conducting ourselves researching to find out about the status of women in Islam.

**Bismillahi Rahmani Rahim** – In the name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful. I will read the prayer (**Al-Fatiha**) in English.

All praise is due to God alone, The Sustainer of the world, Most Gracious, Most Merciful. Lord of the Day of Judgment. Thee alone we worship and Thee alone we do turn for aid. Guide us the straight way. The way of those upon whom Thou hast bestowed Thy blessings. Not of those who have been condemned by Thee, nor of those who go astray.

I would like to begin with Islam that I grew up in. I was told that when I was born the first thing I heard was my father's voice who whispered in my ear *Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar* (God is Great, God is Great), *Ashadu an la illaha ill-Allah, Ashadu an la illaha ill-Allah* (I bear witness that nothing deserves to be worshipped except Allah), *Ashadu anna Muhammed daRasulu-Allah, Ashadu anna Muhammed daRasulu-Allah* (I bear witness that Mohammad is the messenger of Allah).

During the years of growing up we learned about The Five Pillars of Islam and how to read the Koran, the Muslim Holy Book. We believe the Koran is the words of God revealed to the Prophet Muhammed, through the Angel Gabriel in Arabic.

There are five pillars of Islam which every Muslim tries to adhere to. The first is the *Shahada* – *Ashadu an la illaha ill-Allah, wa Ashaduana Muhamed daRasulu-Allah* (There is no God but God and Prophet

Muhammed is the messenger of Allah). The second Pillar is, Pray five times a day; the third, Fast during the month of Ramadan; the fourth, Pay zakat or tithe; and the fifth, Perform the Haj, if you have the means to go on a pilgrimage to Mecca, at least once in your lifetime.

When I was growing up, girls and boys mixed freely. In fact, there was no segregation among males and females. We have many friends from other religious denomination. My closest friends were Chinese and Indians. We played games together, including football with the boys.

There was no particular dress code that we had to adhere to, as long as we dressed modestly. In my family there was no discrimination. I was educated in the Convent, and the name of the Convent is Father Barrie's Convent School, it's a girls school, but the name is "Father Barrie's". My father felt that the Convent gave good education for the girls. I took scripture as a subject in my senior Cambridge examinations. In school I studied the Bible and at home my father employed a tutor to teach us religion of Islam and the Koran. My father saw there was no conflict in terms of our faith. To us the Christian scriptures are religious knowledge. It provided an understanding of other religions and to me it does not make me a lesser Muslim.

Now, allow me to begin by explaining what "Islam" means. I just now greeted you with Assalamu'alaikum. This simple salutation Assalamu'alaikum to another fellow human being, speaks volume of the intention of the greeter. The intention is: I wish you peace. The person who receives it will reply, "Peace be with you too". This is what Islam is all about.

Ladies and gentlemen, Islam and the other religions do not advocate violence, but there are people who are bent to destroy others existence. The Arabic word "islam" means, "submission to the will of God, His laws and His commandments and peace". Islam is the belief in God, in Judgment Day, in the universal message revealed to the Prophets from Adam, Abraham, Jesus to Muhammed, peace and blessings be upon them. Prophet Mohammad is the last messenger and the seal of all the Prophets. (Koran 33:40)

I would like to quote a statement made by Maulana Mohammad Ali in his book, *The Religion of Islam* (1990, p 4):

*A Muslim is one who makes peace with his God and man. Peace with God implies complete submission to His will and peace with man is not only to refrain from evil or injury to another, but also to do good to him; both these ideas find expression in the Koran as the true essence of the religion of Islam.*

We believe the Koran is the words of God revealed to the Prophet Mohammad, through the Angel Gabriel in Arabic. In the Koran mentions are made of other Prophets, Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Noah, Moses, David, Solomon, Jesus and Prophet Mohammad.

Ladies and gentlemen, Islam is a progressive religion with universal principles of human justice, social equity and spiritual moral elevation. The Koran insistently talks about human dignity, justice and equality.

The Koran also addresses the concept of "unity of human kind". In chapter 2, verse 213, it states:

*Men belong to a single community and God sent them messengers to give them happy tidings and warnings, and sent the book with them containing the truth to judge between them in matters of dispute.*

Universalism is also reflected in the vision of justice when God revealed to the Prophet Muhammed:

*O you who believe, stand up as witnesses for God in all fairness and do not let the hatred of a people divert you from justice. Be just: this is the closest to piety and beware of God. Surely God is aware of all you do. (Koran 5:8)*

In another chapter (Koran 22:67), God says:

*We have determined for each community a way of worship which they follow, so they should not contend with you in this matter and you should go on calling them to your Lord. You are surely on the right path.*

This verse clearly illustrates religious diversity. In another surah, in fact, Chapter 5, verse 48, it goes on to explain:

*And to you We have revealed the Book containing the truth, confirming the earlier revelations and preserving them (from change and corruption), So judge between them by what has been revealed by God, and do not follow their whims, side-stepping the truth that has reached you. To each of you We have given a law and a way and a pattern of life. If God had pleased He could surely have made you one people (professing one faith), but He wished to try and test you by that which He gave you, so try to excel in good deeds. To Him will you all return in the end when He will tell you of what you were at variance.*

And in another surah (Koran 49:13), God says:

*O Mankind, We created you from a single pair of a male and female and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other, (not that you may despise each other). Verily the most honoured or noblest of you in the sight of God is (he who is), the most righteous of you (takwa, that is God consciousness, piety).*

The verses that I have just quoted illustrate that virtues and righteousness (God consciousness) are the ultimate salvation irrespective of cultural, ethnic and religious differences. The Koran message is that for different human groups who have to know and understand one another well in order to cooperate for the common benefit of human kind.

Very often, we hear the word *jihad* being uttered by various Muslim groups. Of late it has become an unpleasant word because it has been misused by some Muslims to tarnish Islam. The true meaning of *jihad* is, striving against evil force within oneself, against poverty, bondage and discrimination against women. The killing of innocent people, women and children, is not *Jihad*.

In conduct of war, Muslims should accept peace in the middle of war if the enemy wanted peace. This is reflected in chapter 8, verses 61 to 62:

*But if they decline to peace you also incline to it and put your trust in Allah. Verily, He is the All Hearer, the All Knower, and if they intent to deceive you, then verily He is All Sufficient for you. He it is who supported you with His Help and with the believers.*

In another surah (40) which I would like to quote *Ghafir* meaning "Forgiver", according to Yusuf Ali's interpretation the theme of the surah is *the relation of Faith to Unfaith, Revelation to Rejection, Goodness to Evil, Truth to Falsehood*. It is shown that each of these pairs is the real friend, helper and protector of human being. While the second is his or her enemy.

Ladies and gentlemen, more than 1400 years ago, Islam had uplifted the status of women and gave them rights that were considered revolutionary. Prior to the advent of Islam, women were treated as

mere chattels to be possessed by men. She was considered inferior to men and had no rights whatsoever to education, to inheritance, to work.

The Koran as revealed to the Prophet Muhammed, granted women equality and human dignity. She has rights to education, rights to work, rights to own and dispose her own property, the right to divorce and the right to make contracts. However, we find that Islam as a liberating religion has been used to justify cultural practices and tribal traditions that regard women as inferior and subordinate to men.

We have seen of what happened in Afghanistan during the Taliban rule, where young girls and women were not allowed to education, to work, to a life of human dignity, justice and equality. To my mind, the idea not to allow women to be educated was to silence them from challenging the authorities. Any challenges to their beliefs were considered heretical and met with inhuman punishment.

In the early years of Islam and during the Prophet's time, women played an important role in that society. They were in the battle field taking care of the wounded. The Prophet's wife, Aishah, was a highly intelligent woman and was consulted for her knowledge of the Prophet Sunnah. Another wife of the Prophet, Hafsa, was also involved in the compilation of the Koran. Queen of Sheba was mentioned in the Koran as an example of a good leader.

Ladies and gentlemen, in Malaysia, although women enjoy many rights and benefits that often denied to their sisters in other Muslim countries, they are not equally encouraged to express their views on Islam. Women have fallen silent on matters of religion for much of the 1400 centuries of Islamic legacy. There is a growing concern that cultural practices and religious beliefs continue to undermine the formal rights and benefits granted to us under the law.

Women often fail to access their legal rights because of these traditional beliefs. In order to empower women there is an urgent need to give women legal rights and to inform them of these rights. It is very important that women are given the courage and the ability to overcome their fears in challenging oppressive and unjust interpretation of the religion, as well as social norms, rules and behaviour that have been formulated and defined for them by male religious authorities and society that is patriarchal.

Very often religion has been used to justify practices that oppress women and deny them the rights to question, to challenge and to break out of these socially constructed roles and rules. To challenge what has been deemed to be religious sanctioned is to risk of being called deviant, insulting Islam or un-Islamic and, yet, our readings of the textual sources of Islam show that such injustice and indignities that women suffer are not sanctioned by the religion.

Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to share with you the process Sisters in Islam, went through in terms of our research about the status of women in Islam and how we evolved. We began meeting in 1987 as a support group for the Muslim Law Sub-Committee of the Association of Women Lawyers, to discuss issues and problems faced by Muslim women in the Shariah Courts. The Shariah Court is the Islamic Family Court and in this Court it deals with marriage, divorce, and inheritance.

The group grew out of the concern at the number of complaints we have received from women complaining about the unfairness in the Islamic Family Law. These were complaints from women who were seeking divorce, or maintenance, or custody and other kinds of redress to problems they had in their marriage, such as violence and cruelty and problems during and following divorce.

We decided to hold a workshop on "The Administration of the Islamic Family Laws, and Protection of the Rights of Women", which was jointly sponsored by the Association of Women Lawyers, the women, a first division under the Prime Minister's Department, the National Council of Women Organisations and the Government Religious Department. After that we continued to meet regularly and soon the group evolved into a study group. We had to find out for ourselves whether the

codification, implementation of laws, as well as the values and attitudes of the religious authorities were rooted in Islam, because we could not believe that the religion was oppressive towards women.

Ladies and gentlemen, we turned to the Koran for guidance and answers. We began to read the Koran for ourselves to find out what God says about relationship between women and men. All this while we have been made to believe that women are inferior and subordinate to men and that we do not have a voice in most matters, especially concerning the religion. This process has been a most liberating experience for us. It confirms what we have known all along that the Koran insistently talks about human dignity, justice and equality.

The Koran teaches 'love and mercy' (Koran 9:71) between men and women, 'that men and women are each other's garment' (Koran 2:187) and 'that be you male or female, you are members of one another' (Koran 3:195) and 'that men and women are each other's protecting friends and guardians' (Koran 9:71). These are all beautiful passages regarding the relationship between women and men and, yet, because of the patriarchal society and because the interpretation has always been by men, they have so much so destroyed the beauty of God's messages to the Prophet and revealed to him through the Koran.

We have made to believe that Muslim men have a right to have four wives, but when we read the verse on polygamy, that is chapter 4, verse 3, we find that polygamy is not an unconditional right in Islam, but that it is a responsibility that is allowed in certain circumstances. Now, this verse was revealed to the Prophet during the time when there was war in Medina and many men died leaving widows and orphans. When we read the verse in its entirety it clearly states that:

*If you fear you shall not be able to deal justly with women, then marry only one.*

But when men read that verse, they only read the first part, which states:

*Marry two, three, four.*

And men consider it was a divine right, divine injunction by God telling them that they could marry up to four wives. In the process of researching, we discovered an authentic hadith (sunan Ibn Majah), that the Prophet himself had objected to his nephew, who was also his son-in-law, Saidina Ali Abi Talib, from taking another wife. There were many mothers who were offering their daughters to Saidina Ali. The Prophet said that: Ali could only take another wife if he divorced his beloved daughter, Fatima, because as he said:

*My daughter is part of me and what saddens and hurts her, saddens and hurts me too and any problems that befall her will be felt by me too.*

Ladies and gentlemen, because women have been taught not to actively participate in Islamic knowledge the efforts of Sisters in Islam seem very unique. Sisters in Islam is a group of professional women based in Kuala Lumpur, studying and researching the status of women in Islam. We have come together as believers because we want to achieve the rights granted to us by Islam and over a period of two years we focused on the issues of male/female equality and domestic violence in Islam. This resulted in the publication of two booklets: *Are Women and Men Equal Before Allah?* and: *Are Muslim Men Allowed To Beat Their Wives?*

We became public with the launch of the two booklets in June 1991. I would just like to relate how we published the books, because when we wanted to publish these two booklets we did not have any funds. It was to cost us about 10,000 Malaysian ringgit, (about \$5000 Australian), to publish them, both in English and in the Malay language. Within two weeks we were able to raise sufficient funds to publish them. Relatives, friends, corporate friends came forward to donate and my sister-in-law who

was then working in a bank was able to get her bank to underwrite the cost of publishing the booklets in the Malay language.

The Minister in charge of women affairs agreed to launch the booklets. We had our fears because this was something that was never done before in Malaysia. And this was the first time we went public. It was a great success. 250 people attended the launch and the forum afterwards. They (both men and women) congratulated us for our brave effort and encouraged us to carry on and that what we were doing was in the right path.

To achieve this goal was a laborious process. First, we had to acquaint ourselves with the relevant Koranic verses and *hadith*. We were very fortunate to have with us Dr Amina Wadud, who was then teaching at the International Islamic University in Kuala Lumpur. She is a theologian who had studied the Koran especially on Koran and women. She was able to guide us into the reading of some of the passages.

We looked at these thoroughly without the hindrance of male interpretation. The questions that we raised were real questions taken from our own experiences and the experiences of other women. The focus was on real problems. Since then, we have grown and expanded our programs and activities. We also have our own office now. Our mission is to promote the development of Islam that recognises equality between women and men and that adheres to the principles of justice and democracy.

Our program activities are in the areas of research and the interpretation of Koranic verses, advocacy for policy and law reform and awareness raising and public education.

Ladies and gentlemen, let me share with you our main objectives and they are: to promote and develop a frame work for women's rights in Islam which takes into consideration women's experiences and realities. To eliminate injustice and discrimination against women, by changing practices and values that regard women as inferior to men. To create public awareness and reform laws and policies on issues of equality, justice, freedom, dignity and democracy in Islam.

Now, to achieve these objectives, Sisters in Islam embarks on activities in four program areas. The first is research and interpretation of textual sources of Islam. The second, advocacy for policy and law reform. The third, awareness raising and public education and the fourth, strategic planning and policy formulation.

Ladies and gentlemen, in order to empower women, Sisters in Islam have organised workshops under our public education program on gender, culture and religion. "Equality, Women and Islam". Hudud Laws, Reform of Islamic Family Laws and the Administration of Justice in the Shariah System. Islam and the Modern Nation State, as well as public lecture series to share with the public progressive thinking Islam by eminent progressive Muslim scholars.

We have also conducted a study of women's experiences with the Shariah Court procedures in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor and the report has been submitted to the Director-General of Religious Affairs Department. Recently, we launched a campaign to promote: Monogamy Is My Choice. The wife of the Deputy Prime Minister was very brave to launch this monogamy campaign.

It was a great success. Representatives from women organizations and the women wings of political parties and several men came to support our campaign. And we had very good press coverage. However, there was one Malay language newspaper that had an unfair report of our campaign. And it was very naughty of them to do so. A reporter from that paper had interviewed a group of religious leaders (Muftis) who then accused us of going against Islam by campaigning against polygamy. Our campaign was not to abolish polygamy but to restrict polygamy. We later had a meeting with the Director General of the Religious Affairs where we explained our stand. We suggested to him that

there should be stricter laws on polygamy and that any man who wants to take a second wife must seek consent from the first wife. The Director General did not see any violation in our campaign. The following day several newspapers carried a photograph of him holding one of our campaign stickers '*if you cannot be just, then marry only one*'.

He was also interviewed over TV and the news also carried his statement. The Director-General also asked us to keep him informed of our research from time to time. In fact, when we met with him we suggested that for the Friday prayers' sermon – the Imam should be promoting monogamous marriage, rather than polygamous marriage.

We are distributing our campaign stickers across the country and they are:

- *If you cannot be just then marry only one*
- *One husband equals one wife*
- *Monogamy is my choice*

Sisters in Islam also launch monthly study session as part of our effort to build a small constituency of young women who will be able to stand up and speak on women's rights in Islam. We also have launched a legal literacy column in the Malay language newspaper every Friday called: Family and Laws. The response from women in distress has been so overwhelmed that we are now thinking of devoting one day in the week where these women could come to our office to seek advice and consultation.

More often than not when women go to the Shariah Court to complain their problems, and usually it is the women also who are guilty of this, they would be told to go home and be patient. The court officers would also tell them that it might have been the women's fault for their failed marriages. Don't blame the men but blame the women.

As part of our advocacy program, we also have submitted several memoranda to the Government to urge for law reform in areas of concern, especially in the Islamic Family Law and Administration of Justice in the Shariah system. Through the media we spearhead public debate on topical issues of concern and offer alternative progressive interpretations of the Koran and hadith texts and alternative juristic opinions on polygamy, equality, dress and modesty, the Hudud Law, domestic violence, arbitrariness in implementation of the Shariah Criminal Laws, equal rights to guardianship for Muslim women and punishment for apostasy. We also continue to have inter-faith dialogue to promote the unity of human kind.

There are two States in Malaysia, Kelantan and Trengganu, that are under the Pan-Islamic Party (PAS), and they wanted to introduce the Hudud Bill. Under the Hudud Bill an unmarried woman who is pregnant is assumed to have committed adultery even if she has been raped. The onus is on her to produce four witnesses to substantiate her claim. If she is not able to do that she will be flogged 80 lashes.

Yet, such punishment was not in the Koran. In fact the verse in the Koran (24:4) was specially revealed to protect women from slander and accusation of adultery. This verse was revealed to Prophet Muhammed after an incident when the Prophet's wife, Aishah, was left behind when they moved camp. One of the companions went to look for her and brought her back. And when she arrived with the companion there were rumours going around to say that she had an affair with him. The verse that was revealed to the Prophet said that any man accused a chaste woman of immoral acts has to produce four witnesses to support his allegation and if he cannot produce four witnesses he will be punished with eighty lashes. But the provision in the Hudud Bill is for the woman to produce four witnesses which is a gross violation of God's law.

Sisters in Islam has made it their *jihad* to promote a voice of moderation in Islam and awareness of the true principles of Islam, principles that enshrine the concept of equality between women and men and to strive towards a society that upholds the principle of equality, justice, freedom and dignity within a democratic state. Thank you.

## Questions

(Verbatim comments)

### Question 1

Thank you to give me the opportunity to ask this question. I am sure there are many questions but I will just try to summarise the whole range of questions that are coming to my mind. You are taking a very "softly, softly" approach towards the Shariah Court and as we know that it has wreaked havoc from Nigeria to Pakistan, whether it is by tradition or by law, it is time that women should take a really forthright approach and instead of just glossing over it that Koran gives equality, Koran does not give equality.

For instance, a woman has to live with the cultural conditioning that the man can have four wives. It is absurd. Why woman has to accept that, that the man can have four wives? I wouldn't like my daughter to grow up, or my sisters to grow up with this cultural conditioning that their husband will have second, third or fourth. Not only that, even slave women are there, illegal system. The Koran itself describes different punishments to free women and so-called slave women. How it is that God recognises the free women and the slave women, what sort of equality it is. Now, if you go back to practice of Islam it is even more problematic. You quoted Aisha, Prophet, who was 50-plus years of age and married when she was 7 years. How come? How can we keep on accepting it and don't take ..... approach that enough is enough. You can respond to it, thank you very much.

MS ELIZABETH HO:

So the question essentially is about the Shariah situation and the need for women to basically rise against that kind of scenario. It is more a comment than a question.....

MS ZURIAH ALJEFFRI:

To the question about Aisha, it was true that she was betrothed to the Prophet when she was seven years old. The marriage was consummated when she reached puberty at the age of nine. The Prophet's first wife, Khadijah, was a widow who was fifteen years older than him. The Prophet did not take another wife during the twenty years of his marriage to Khadijah. After her death, he entered into polygamous marriage either for political reasons or to build alliances and all his wives were either widows or have been married before. The only virgin he married was Aisha.

I think there are now groups of women – Muslim groups – who do not want to opt out of the religion, but who want to look within the religious frame work about rights. Of course, the honour killings (husbands who suspect their wives of having an affair will kill them) in Pakistan, Jordan and a few other places are not Islam. It is the cultural practices and I think in Jordan now they have made a ruling that it is a crime, but in Pakistan it is still being practised and this is where I think it is not only just women themselves, but men also have got to come out and re-look and re-think about the religion and the status of women in religion so that, there is human dignity, justice and equality for both.

MS ELIZABETH HO:

Thank you. Now, we have another question and it needs to be a question because, otherwise, we will go on too long so, thank you.

## Question 2

I actually had the pleasure of being in Kuala Lumpur when a newspaper article was published from the Sisters of Islam and it was so measured and so rational and so reasonable that I was struck by it and remembered it until now. We can see around the world that there is threat to anybody, anywhere who is expressing views of moderation, and I just wondered if you could comment on how people all over the world might be able to support each other in those kinds of rational approaches to problem-solving?

MS ALJEFFRI:

Thank you for your compliment about the way we go about writing our letters. There are groups, there are Ulama who said: you are not to think, you are not to use logic, because you are just to obey, but the Koran says: you have to use logic, you have to use mental faculty. In fact, the Prophet himself said: if you need to get more knowledge go as far as China.

Also, we believe in what we are doing. We are also networking with other groups of women as well as men whose views on Islam are liberal and progressive. We are fortunate to know some progressive Muslim scholars in the United States whom we consult for their views as well as accuracy in terms of statements we made with regard to issues of concern. In Indonesia, the religious teachers in the pesantren (religious schools) are very much advanced in their knowledge of liberal Islam. They have translated books from Arabic to the Indonesian language and there are ongoing discussions on the interpretation of the Koran to suit modern time and we have participated and also we have sent out staff to Indonesia for workshops on the status of women in Islam. There are very progressive thinking men who support us and want to be Sisters.

Professor Abdullahi An-Naim from Emory University in Atlanta said: I'm one of the Sisters now and we said you can be our friend and support us. The movement is growing because I think for too long, for over 1400 years we have been very much influenced, or we have been under the control of a patriarchal society that it is about time that we reclaim our rights that are given to us and in doing so I think the movement has got to have more networking.

For example, in Kuala Lumpur, we have organised two regional conferences, one is on Islam, Reproductive Health and Women's Rights and the other is on the Family Law and so we had women experts in these two subjects to come to Malaysia – not only women but men – from Indonesia, from the Philippines, from Thailand, from Singapore, who came together to discuss these issues, and the proceedings are published and widely distributed to groups dealing in these issues. I have here with me the first two booklets: *Are Muslim Men Allowed To Beat Their Wives? Are Women And Men Equal Before Allah?* We also have a list of publications, you may want to order some of the books that we have published. We also have a website which I can give you. The website publishes all the press statements on apostasy, on freedom of expression, on polygamy, on dress, so there are various other subjects in response to what religious – certain religious groups say about these subjects.

Thank you

### Question 3

I'm from the Muslim Womens' Association of South Australia and, first of all, I would like to say: thank you for that uplifting interpretation of the way you believe Islam – because it is the way I believe Islam and many of our sisters do. I would just like you to clarify a point for me, especially after the comment of the last gentleman.

With the Koran, are what you are saying is that the interpretation – because they have been done by men – need to be looked at again. That if anybody comes along and picks up the Koran and reads it, a Muslim or a non-Muslim, the interpretation of what they are reading has actually had a different slant put on it and that what we need to do is to re-look at that interpretation, so we can really understand the true meaning of what the Koran is saying. Is that the point that you have been making?

MS ZURIAH ALJEFFRI:

Yes, I think so. The thing is, one has got to look at the Koran, you know, certain verses – the revelations, certain revelations are within the context of that particular society and there are other verses that are very universal. So one has to look at the Koran as a history as well as the universal message of justice, human dignity, equity and equality. There are Muslim scholars who are re-looking into the reinterpretation of the Koran.

In fact, in the early days of Islam there was so much discussion going on about the interpretation of the Koran and then the doors of *ijtihad* (discussion and reasoning) were closed and there is a ruling to say you cannot any more discuss, or re-interpret. One has to move on with time and you have got to re-look at interpretations. That may be appropriate for that particular time in that particular society, but we move on and we are in a society that is much more progressive and there are many, many things that are happening that are not even mentioned in the Koran, but we have got to look at it within the Islamic religious perspective and how we deal with it. I think it is very important, we can't close the doors of *ijtihad*, you cannot close the mind off from discussing issues that affect us because if you do that then we fail as Muslims to find answers within the religion to cope with the changing times.

### Final remarks

MS ELIZABETH HO:

Thank you. It is now my pleasure to invite Sir Eric Neal, a former Governor of South Australia, Chancellor of Flinders University, our Patron and Chair of the Australia Malaysian Foundation to give the formal vote of thanks to Zuriah.

Thank you, Sir Eric

SIR ERIC NEAL:

Thank you, Elizabeth. I would like to thank the Chair of the Hawke Centre, Dr Basil Hetzel, for inviting me here tonight to propose this vote of thanks in my role as the Chair of the Australian Malaysian Foundation. The Australia Malaysian Foundation is an organisation whose main objective is to promote goodwill between the peoples of our two countries. A sister organisation, or a back-to-back organisation in Malaysia, is known as the Malaysia Australia Foundation and that is Chaired by the Chief Minister of Sarawak, Tan Sri Taib, who is known to many of you, who is a distinguished graduate in law from the Adelaide University.

The Foundation promotes goodwill and tonight we have seen a wonderful example of increasing our understanding. Sharifah Zuriah Aljeffri has given us a most thought provoking address and I think the different interpretations of the messages of the Koran by leaders of that faith, really, remind us of the

history of our Christian faith. Over many centuries, many wrongs were done in the name of Christianity and there were many interpretations of the Bible and the Christian faiths and it is perhaps only in modern times, dare I say this, last century, that tolerance has largely rectified this. Today most Christian groups – indeed I hope all Christian groups – live in harmony, respecting each other's views and showing a degree of tolerance which was not evident for perhaps the previous 1700 or 1800 years.

It is pleasing to see that women such as Zuriah are fighting, fighting with words I'm happy to say, to ensure that women's rights are recognised and that the laws of countries with significant Muslim populations, reflect perhaps the spirit of that faith and not perhaps somebody's interpretation of the faith. We wish Zuriah and her colleagues well in their journey. I think what is needed today in all parts of the world is tolerance, and tolerance comes from understanding issues and Zuriah, thank you, for helping our understanding. I am sure I speak for us all when I say I am much better informed about the challenges of the Islamic world than I was an hour ago, thank you.

MS ELIZABETH HO:

Well, that brings us to the close. I would like to thank everyone for being here and to remember Zuriah's words:

*Our minds are not closed tonight, they are opened.*

Thank you, Zuriah.

MS ZURIAH ALJEFFRI:

Thank you so much.