

Reflections on the Fourth World Conference on Women

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The conference is a distant memory now, but what stands out is the large number of Muslim women from all over the world who attended the NGO Forum, the unofficial part of the conference, held in Huairou, China.

KARAMAH was represented by two individuals, myself and Asifa Quraishi. Asifa was also a member of the Muslim Women's League (MWL). KARAMAH (in DC) and MWL (in California) actually coordinated efforts to set up a workshop on Islam and Women's right. So, Samar Hathout from MWL also joined us.

Before we went to Huairou, KARAMAH held several meetings with other American Muslim women (I believe Karima Altomare was one of them) who suggested that we prepare a simple article on Islam and women's rights for distribution at the conference. We did so, and printed a modest number of copies to take with us. Our approach was, and has always been, to root our views in the Qur'an and *sunnah* of the Prophet. The article was named "An Introduction to Muslim Women's Rights," which was subsequently published in a book entitled *Windows of Faith*, by Gisela Webb.

Upon arrival, we discovered that some countries with very traditional points of view about women had printed a large number of documents representing this view for distribution at the Forum. They also asked their delegations of women to distribute them. Despite the request, rooms remained full of these undistributed documents.

The NGO site was quite challenging, especially on rainy days, and our workshop happened on a rainy day. Yet we had a respectable number of attendees. These women, as well as others, expressed to us their interest in the fresh Islamic point of view KARAMAH was offering at the workshop and meetings. So, we called for a general meeting of Muslim women attending the Forum, and a large number showed up.

This was a very moving experience. Once the group ascertained our sincere intentions at KARAMAH, they became very enthusiastic to work with us on a gender-equitable view of Islam. They were also critical of the material being distributed by their countries. Unfortunately, the absence of the Internet and social media at that time meant that we could only meet if we held an international conference. Thus, this wish never materialized, and we were not able to work together.

The group even tried to issue a joint press release with KARAMAH, but there were many external obstacles placed in our way. In the end, KARAMAH issued its own press release. The press release focused on yet another challenge faced by Muslim women at the Forum. Many

Muslim women at the Forum felt silenced by the Western Women's Movement (WWM). Even as the WWM claimed to defend Muslim women's rights, it set for them what it considered to be their "issues" and their priorities, without showing any deference to the Muslim women's point of view. The Muslim women dared to disagree. They found WWM's views Orientalist, even colonialist, and hence they rejected them outright.

KARAMAH addressed this issue in its press release. It quoted Alice Walker in her call to use the term "womanist" instead of "feminist" for women of color. The release explains that "[t]he difference is that a 'womanist' is committed to the survival and wholeness of an entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist... traditionally universalist." This distinction captures KARAMAH's position at the conference and in its current work.

I think a lot about these days, and how things could have been quite different had technology been more advanced at the time. But a quarter of a century has passed, and here we are again still trying to spread the message around. Maybe now, we can have a better chance to create a global movement.