



**PROVISION FOR POST PROJECT EVALUATIONS FOR THE UNITED NATIONS  
DEMOCRACY FUND  
Contract NO.PD:C0110/10**

**EVALUATION REPORT**



**UDF-MAL-12-512 - The National Campaign towards  
Muslim Family Law Reform (MFL Campaign) in Malaysia**

**Date: 1 September 2016**

## **Acknowledgements**

The evaluators would like to thank everyone who took the time to provide their expertise and insight on the issues of gender equality and the Muslim Family Law in Malaysia. In particular, Sisters of Islam and those who participated in their events for their support to the evaluation team during the field work.

All errors and omissions remain the responsibility of the authors.

## **Disclaimer**

The views expressed in this report are those of the evaluators. They do not represent those of UNDEF or of any of the institutions referred to in the report.

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## I. Executive Summary

### (i) Project Data

The *National Campaign towards Muslim Family Law Reform (MFL Campaign) in Malaysia* project sought to increase public demand for law reform based on the principles of justice and equality by raising the awareness of Muslim women on their rights within Islam, the discriminatory provisions within the MFL<sup>1</sup> and the issues it creates in regards to women's access to justice. Its intended outcomes were: 1) increased awareness of rights among women at the grassroots level; 2) increased public discussions on religion; and 3) increased engagement and dialogue between women's groups and government stakeholders by 2015.

This was a two-year USD 225,000 project (1 February 2014 - 31 March 2016). However, the project had delays in implementing some of the project elements and used only the first two tranches of grant funding. An additional USD 22,500 was retained by UNDEF for evaluation and monitoring purposes. Thus, the actual amount provided to the grantee was USD 180,000. The project was implemented by the Sisters in Islam (SIS), a Malaysian Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) based in Selangor. Its main intended activities were to:

- Conduct legal awareness training and advanced "ECHO" training for women with leadership potential;
- Train trainers on advancing the rights and status of women;
- Conduct a workshop for media practitioners and organize an eight day study tour to Indonesia for Muslim youth;
- Conduct a one day public forum in Kuala Lumpur (KL) to generate public discussions on MFL; and
- Hold a two day national convention on the Muslim Family Law to produce a resolution calling for MFL reform.

### (ii) Evaluation Findings

The project objectives were directly **relevant** to the needs of Muslim women in Malaysia to be treated equally under the Muslim Family Law, and in particular for single mothers who were directly affected by its discriminatory nature during their Sharia court cases of divorce, alimony and child support. It was also directly relevant to the mandate of the grantee which had been fighting for the rights of Muslim women based on Islamic principles of equality, justice and freedom since 1988. There was a need to raise public awareness on the problems faced by Muslim women because of the discriminatory aspects of the MFL and to put pressure on policy makers to take action on these problems. The project though lost relevance during implementation because of the intermittent nature of the activities, lack of follow up with participants and the limited focus on the advocacy elements of the design.

The project was carried out along the lines in the project document but with some major modifications. For instance, instead of doing four two-day awareness trainings with grass-roots women, it did eight one-day trainings. It also moved the national convention from Year 1 to the end of Year 2. The latter at UNDEF request which saw the convention as the culmination of project activities. SIS held the required workshops, forums, and study tour, some of which were extremely well attended, such as the workshop in Kedah with 143 participants. At the same time, some of the other events, such as the journalist workshop and the national convention had lower than expected levels of participation. Some of this was due to SIS's history as an

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<sup>1</sup> The MFL is also known as the Islamic Family Law. MFL is used in this report since this was term used by the grantee for this project.

outspoken advocate for Muslim's women's rights, and of a religious edict (fatwa) issued against them labeling them as "deviants." This affected the receptiveness of some policy makers and limited attendance at some events especially by some governing officials and members of the ruling party. This in turn directly affected the effectiveness and impact of the project. At this point it is hard to know if SIS would have been more effective had it followed its original plan, but given the other implementation issues noted in the report, the outcomes would have likely remained the same.

The **effectiveness** of the different trainings and events is hard to judge as limited performance data was collected. Most of the women participants interviewed had a difficult time differentiating between the legal awareness workshops, the 'advanced' Echo workshop and the TOT trainings, even though SIS was able to clearly articulate the purpose for each to the evaluators. The most useful aspect seemed to be the question and answer time in the legal awareness workshops where the women could ask questions specific to their own divorce or custody cases. At the same time, effectiveness was affected by the lack of consistent follow up with most participants, the one-size-fits all training approach in workshops that mixed women with vastly different training needs, and the limited focus on advocacy. SIS intended for the Echo and TOT workshops to develop the advocacy elements, but these actions were held so late in the project that this has yet to morph into an advocacy effort.

Effectiveness and **efficiency** were also affected by the SIS conception of the project as an extension of its regular activities, with the funding allowing them to increase their scale, resurrect the Coalition of Muslim Women's Rights (GAHWI) that it had created earlier to lead the advocacy movement, and to hold a long awaited national convention for GAHWI to showcase the MFL problems. Synergies between regular programming and project activities are essential, but not enough focus on a project and its specific purpose and objectives, can lose its developmental nature, making it little more than a donor-funded activity check list. In addition, only two half-time staff and some administrative time were planned for within the budget. This is insufficient for an efficient implementation of a development project of this magnitude; especially when the grantee did all of the activities itself and all with face to face methods. This limited the amount of time and effort that could be spent on each component, which is evident in the level of results. SIS came in on budget, but needed to find other donor funding to fill in some of the gaps.

The **impact** of the project is difficult to assess without performance data beyond the output level. The overall situation today remains largely the same as when the project started. However, if the project had not occurred, it is likely that the space to discuss Muslim women's rights would have closed further as the SIS activities kept these issues in the public arena. It also seems likely that this project provided a safe space for women to discuss their problems and to find strength in collective voice. It also likely increased the awareness of some participants that some religious edicts are open to interpretation and that women have rights under Islam. This and the information provided on the court system would have empowered some of the participants, especially the grassroots single women and mothers. The project also gave some of the women's groups, pro-reform media and interested Members of Parliament (MPs) the language and justifications they could use to support MFL reform when that issue arose.

SIS is continuing to work for legal reform and to promote women's rights under Islamic law. If the GAHWI network can congeal into its own entity and become more active, this will also help to **sustain** the effort and increase grassroots support for MFL reform. There was **UNDEF-value added** as it allowed SIS to expand its activities, resurrect GAHWI and hold a national convention that it had wanted to do for several years. Donor funding for human rights projects is extremely limited in Malaysia because of its upper-middle income status. It is unlikely that

SIS would have received the level of funding needed to undertake this programme from another donor.

### **(iii) Conclusions**

- **The project addressed an important issue** that was needed within the context especially for Muslim women who find their rights more restricted than other Malaysians due to its dual legal system. The **grantee was the right organization to support for a project that addressed Islam and women's rights**. SIS was knowledgeable and experienced in the sector and appears to be the only women-led organization working on this issue.

- **The project attempted to effect change from the bottom up, but more activities at that level were needed to generate the desired outcomes.** One-off workshops are not enough to create the type of momentum and broad based support needed to create a surge in public voice for law reform. In addition, the **advocacy elements were underdeveloped.**

- **The legal awareness training was useful for single women**, particularly single mothers, and contained information that helped them fight for their legal rights in divorces and custody battles. But to be useful for advocacy purposes it should include information on how citizens can petition their representatives and hold them accountable.

- There was logic to the sequencing of the activities in the project design, but the **project itself was implemented as a series of activities** and would have benefited from being delivered as more integrated and cohesive programme, with adequate follow up, needs based trainings and the use of other developmental approaches.

- **The project might have had more significant results than were visible** to the evaluators, but **it is not possible to know as the results beyond outputs were not tracked.**

### **(iv) Recommendations**

- For similar projects in the future, the evaluators recommend **continued support for gender rights** for donor programmes in similar contexts.

- **Ensure projects are implemented in a cohesive development manner** that provides sufficient levels of engagement with participants and policy makers for the duration of the project. Best practices for all types of projects are available on most donors' websites with tips for project design, implementation and strengthening performance.

- **Expand leverage of existing groups and networks to help deliver the project, provide synergistic efforts and help carry the message.** SIS has a unique niche but other NGOs working for gender equality and legislative reform can also help deliver the message through their different channels and constituencies. Expand reach by using TOT to train partner NGOs in every state to deliver project workshops. Harness the power of celebrities for public service announcements. Continue to leverage social media and build an online site for persons to find information on the MFL, join the network, register complaints, lobby their policy maker and endorse legal reform.

- **Take advantage of election years to get commitments from parties and policy makers for MFL reform.** Election years provide good opportunities to question

candidates about their positions on gender rights and to lobby them to include legal reform in their electoral platforms. This will also increase the visibility of the issues and build momentum for a parallel advocacy effort for law reform.

- ***Continue and expand work with grass roots education*** through existing networks, not only for women, but those that deal with social justice issues, education, employment, culture, etc. Send press releases with main messages and explanations to a wide range of these groups electronically on a regular basis for them to distribute to their members. Include student and youth groups and link this to the online site recommended above to help expand reach of project messages and to build a broad based national constituency for reform.

- ***Adopt more performance based indicators*** that can be easily collected and tracked throughout the project, with baseline and end of project data. For example, percentage increase in the level of understanding of participants and changes in behaviour on issues related to women's rights under Malaysian and Islamic laws. This could be measured through pre and post tests or surveys. When seeking attitudinal change, include knowledge, attitude and practices questions so that this change can be measured.

## II. Introduction and development context

### (i) **The project and evaluation objectives**

*The National Campaign Towards Muslim Family Law Reform (MFL Campaign) in Malaysia* project (UDF-MAL-12-512) was a two-year USD 225,000 project implemented by the Sisters in Islam (SIS). Delays in implementation led to the last tranche of UNDEF funding not being disbursed, leaving the total project budget at USD 180,000. Of this, USD 22,500 was retained by UNDEF for monitoring and evaluation purposes. The project ran from 1 February 2014 to 31 March 2016, including a two month no-cost time extension. Its main objective was to create a surge in popular demand for reform of the Muslim Family Law (MFL) by raising women's awareness of their rights and building their capacity to voice their demands for changes through a communications and media strategy and by direct lobbying of policy and decision makers.

The evaluation of this project is part of the larger evaluation of the Rounds 2, 3 and 4 UNDEF-funded projects. Its purpose is to “contribute towards a better understanding of what constitutes a successful project which will in turn help UNDEF to develop future project strategies. Evaluations are also to assist stakeholders to determine whether projects have been implemented in accordance with the project document and whether anticipated project outputs/outcomes have been achieved”.<sup>2</sup>

### (ii) **Evaluation methodology**

The evaluation took place in May and June 2016 with field work done in Malaysia from 30 May - 4 June 2016. The evaluation was conducted by Sue Nelson and Ka Ea Lim, experts in democratic governance. The UNDEF evaluations are more qualitative in nature and follow a standard set of evaluation questions that focus on the project's relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, sustainability and any value added from UNDEF-funding (Annex 1). This report follows that structure. The evaluators reviewed available documentation on the project, on the context of the Muslim Family Law and on the rights issues of Muslim women (Annex 2).

In Malaysia, the team met with the Sisters of Islam, members of the Action Group for Gender Equality (JAG) and the Coalition of Muslim Women's Rights (GAHWI), project participants, members of the Indonesian study tours, media and Members of Parliament (MPs). They also met with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) staff who monitored the project's milestone events. The work was done in the Kuala Lumpur and in the state of Selangor, with participants outside of these areas interviewed by phone. The list of persons interviewed is provided in Annex 3.

During the preparatory work, the evaluators identified several issues which they followed up with during their interviews. These included:

- **Extent of the networking activities done** as the design intended to work with networks of women's and other rights organizations as well as with key stakeholders to determine if this was an effective way to extend project reach and impact;
- **Effects of the awareness training, youth study tour and media training**, and if this created a broad based group of support for gender rights and MFL legal reform;
- **Budgeting and design issues** since the scope for some activities were changed and costs appeared to have been under-estimated in some cases;

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<sup>2</sup> Operational Manual for the UNDEF-funded project evaluations, p. 6.



- **Extent of project reach beyond outputs**, since the anticipated outcome was a surge in public voice for reform of the MFL which was not accomplished; and,
- **Lessons learned from working in a difficult enabling environment** on a sensitive and politicized topic.

In addition, the team assessed the issues raised by UNDEF:

- **Design issues** and if the project design was too ambitious;
- **Project management issues** including changes in project activity and staffing;
- **Other donor contributions** including identifying other donors, activities and levels of funding; and,
- **Results and lessons learned** about what worked and why which could be used to inform future grant making for NGOs working in similar contexts.

### ***(iii) Development context***

Malaysia is a federation of 13 states operating within a constitutional monarchy with the king as the head of the federation. Out of the 13 states, nine are ruled by a sultan and the other four by a governor each. All nine sultans and four governors sit in the Conference of Rulers where they elect the king every five years or when necessary due to death, resignation or removal of the incumbent from office.

Article 3 (1) of the Malaysian federal constitution states that Islam is the religion of the federation but other religions may be practised in peace and harmony in any part of the federation. The constitution also states that religion falls under the state list, thus making religion a state matter. Since Malaysia's independence in 1957, all 13 states have adopted Islam as their official state religion. In states having a sultan, the sultan is also the head of Islam while the king is the head of Islam for states without sultans.

Each sultan is given all the rights and privileges as head of Islam in their respective state except in matters that the Conference of Rulers agrees would apply to the whole federation. Each sultan is assisted and advised by their respective state Islamic Religious Council. Each state has its own Islamic Religious Department, Mufti, Fatwa Committee and Sharia Subordinate Courts and Sharia High Court. Sharia court judges are generally appointed by the sultan on the advice of the Islamic Religious Council. These state institutions are responsible for regulating Islam in matters pertaining to succession, marriage, divorce, maintenance, guardianship, adoption; *inter alia* and only apply to those who profess the religion of Islam. Article 121 (1) (a) of the federal constitution ensures that the delineation of jurisdiction between the Sharia and civil courts are strictly adhered to.

Malaysia has ratified the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). For CEDAW and CRC, some reservations made were based on religious grounds. For example, some of the international provisions must not conflict with the provisions under Islamic Sharia laws such as article 16(1) (a) on the equal right of women to enter into marriage, article 16(1) (c) on the equal rights and responsibilities of both husband and wife during marriage and at its dissolution, as well as other provisions pertaining to equal rights between a mother and father in regard to guardianship and adoption of children.

Due to Malaysia's dualist approach to international law, an act of parliament is required before international human rights conventions can be directly applied to its domestic laws. In 2001, the federal constitution was amended to include the prohibition of gender discrimination under article 8(2), aimed at complying with Malaysia's obligations under CEDAW.

All Malaysians who profess the religion of Islam are governed by the Islamic Family Law (Federal Territory Act) 1984. Although Muslim women are subjected to the same Islamic laws and policies as their male counterparts, they are disproportionately affected in matters pertaining to marriage, divorce and other aspects of Islamic family law when compared to Muslim men. For example, it is more difficult for a Muslim woman to obtain a divorce than a Muslim man. The Islamic family law (also referred to in this evaluation as the Muslim Family Law) also places Muslim women in a weaker position in the division of matrimonial assets and grants them with fewer rights in matters of custodial and maintenance of children. The law also requires a Muslim woman to have a guardian's consent before she can marry. Often, a Muslim wife is denied alimony if she unreasonably refuses to obey the lawful wishes or commands of her husband.<sup>3</sup>

In the concluding comments made by the United Nations CEDAW Committee at its 35<sup>th</sup> session in 31 May 2006, the committee expressed concern about the existence of the dual legal system of civil and multiple versions of state Sharia law, which results in the continuing discrimination against women, particularly in the field of marriage and family relations. The committee also expressed concern about Malaysia's restrictive interpretation of Sharia law, including the MFL which adversely affects the rights of Muslim women.

The MFL was amended in 2005 despite civil society protests that the changes were damaging to women's rights. In particular, according to the Sisters in Islam, made polygamy easier, gave men the unilateral right of men to divorce without reason (even through a text message), and ability to freeze the assets or property of his wife. Since the MFL does not differentiate between the income and assets contributed by a husband or wife, it also allows the source of maintenance in cases of polygamy or divorce to come from the assets contributed by the wife.<sup>4</sup> The Attorney General subsequently developed amendments to address some of these discriminatory provisions through a consultative process, but these amendments have yet to be brought before Parliament.

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<sup>3</sup> Moustafa, *'Islamic Law, Women's Rights, and Popular Legal Consciousness in Malaysia'*, *Law and Social Inquiry*

<sup>4</sup> Sisters of Islam, *Women Living Under Muslim Laws*

### III. Project strategy

#### **(i) Project approach and strategy**

With this project SIS intended to build a surge of public voices to advocate for the reform of the Muslim Family Law which had several discriminatory provisions added in 2005. Although corrective amendments were subsequently drafted by the Attorney General in a consultative process which included SIS, those amendments were never tabled in Parliament. This has left a law in place that discriminates against women and denies them equal justice.

SIS identified several problems that contributed to the lack of action on the MFL. This included the monopolization of religion by conservatives and politicians; citizen reluctance to question this or to discuss other interpretations of Islam; and the use of religion to justify discrimination against women under Sharia law.

In particular, SIS intended this project to address the:

- **Lack of awareness among women of their legal rights** under Islam as they are taught that Muslim men have absolute authority in marriage and do not know that they have rights under existing law;
- **Lack of collective voice calling for reforms** which is needed to spur complacent policy makers to address the situation and take the needed reforms, and;
- **Lack of public debate** on issues involving religion, resulting in a growing conservatism and gender bias among judges and court officials.

SIS expected to address these problems by creating a surge in public voices calling for law reform at the district, state and national levels, and through the direct lobbying of governmental stakeholders and policy makers. They intended to lobby for the tabling of the amendment to the MFL drafted in 2005 which would address some of its more discriminatory elements.

In particular, the UNDEF project intended to:

- **Provide legal awareness training** to grassroots women through four two-day workshops that would introduce participants to basic information on Islamic law, the legal system and women's rights in Islam. Participants were to be identified through SIS's existing networks from single mother's associations and Muslim women entrepreneurs;
- **Provide an advanced "Echo" training** for grassroots women with leadership potential to create a solid support base for law reform at the grassroots level, and empower women by becoming agents of change in their communities through one two-day workshop;
- **Train trainers** through one two-day workshop to identify more trainers with an expertise in understanding Islam from a rights-based perspective who could help shape the public discourse on Islam. Building their proficiency would also require their inclusion in SIS trainings as co-facilitators and undertaking their own trainings;
- **Provide a workshop for media practitioners** to expose them to progressive scholarship on gender equality within a Quranic framework, on the discrimination of women in the Sharia system in Malaysia, and the need to reform the MFL;
- **Organize a study tour to Indonesia for Muslim youth** to expose them to Muslim diversity within pluralistic Indonesia and for them to share with other youth through blogs and social media;
- **Conduct a public forum** to generate public discussion and a media buzz on the Muslim family laws in Malaysia to help develop the surge in public voices calling for law reform; and,

- **Hold a national convention on the MFL** for community and religious leaders, policy makers, MPs, and government agencies to highlight the discriminatory elements of the MFL and create a common agenda geared towards law reform. The convention would develop a resolution calling for reform of the MFL that would be presented to the Prime Minister's office.

SIS also intended to hold five half-day stakeholder meetings between women's groups and policy makers to further promote the MFL agenda. These activities were expected to take place in Kuala Lumpur and in the north and south of Malaysia.

The intended outcomes for this project were: (i) increased awareness of rights among women at the grassroots level by 2015; (ii) increased public discussions on religion by 2015; and, (iii) increased engagement and dialogue between women's groups and government stakeholders by 2015.

The major assumption underlying the project, which was also its main risk, was the ability of SIS to secure meetings with relevant government stakeholders. SIS intended to mitigate this risk through the use of different strategies to pressure the government for meetings, including a concerted media strategy and activities with grassroots women.

Sustainability was expected to be secured through the continued activism of the participants towards achieving a more just and equal Muslim Family Law. The training of women was also anticipated to result in skills and knowledge transfer that would remain with them and which would be useful for future activities. It would also enable them to act as multipliers and share their knowledge gained. SIS also expected to continue its various activities and initiatives after the end of the UNDEF grant.

The project targeted women, but SIS also expected to include men in the activities, especially for the media workshop and study tours.

## (ii) Logical framework

Project activities

Intended outcomes

Medium-term impacts

Long-term development objective

Increased awareness of rights among women at the grassroots levels

- 4 two-day workshops on legal awareness for 30 participants each
- 1 two-day ECHO (advanced) training for 30 participants
- 1 two-day TOT on understanding Islam within rights perspective for 5 - 20 participants

- Increased awareness of women's rights
- Empowered group of women leaders act as agents of change

Increased engagement of women in local, national, regional and international levels

Increased public support of and understanding for gender equality within Islam

Muslim Family Law based on principles of justice and equality

Increased public discussion on religion

- 1 Media practitioner workshop for 20 - 25 participants
- 1 eight-day study tour to Indonesia for youth activists

- Media allies cultivated
- Increased media competency when writing about religion
- Increased exposure to Muslim diversity within pluralistic Indonesia

Increased media coverage about discrimination against women in Sharia system in Malaysia

Increased critical thinking on religious issues among participants, reported in social media, blogs and on line press

Muslim Family Law based on principles of justice and equality

Increased engagement and dialogue between women's groups and government stakeholders

- 5 half day stakeholder meetings for 15 - 20 participants per meeting (3 KL, 2 outside)
- National Convention on MFL reform held

- Resolution on reforms needed to MFL developed and delivered to the Prime Minister's Office
- Advocacy meetings with policy makers, community leaders and religious leaders

Increased popular support and demand for gender equality within Islam

More awareness and openness among government and policy makers on need to amend MFL

Muslim Family Law based on principles of justice and equality

## IV. Evaluation findings

### (i) Relevance

The project objectives were directly relevant to the needs of Muslim women in Malaysia to be treated equally under the Muslim Family Law. The amendments needed to make the MFL more equitable had been done since 2005, but were never brought before parliament to be discussed or adopted. Women, and in particular single mothers, were adversely affected by the MFL. Although polygamy is legal for male Muslims and it is easy for them to get a divorce, it is much more difficult for a female Muslim to get a divorce, or obtain justice for everyday rights such as alimony or child support through the Sharia court system. Muslim women are generally unaware of their rights and the male dominated Sharia court system often favors the man. The project component to raise public awareness on the problems faced by Muslim women and the need to amend the MFL was directly relevant given that policy makers have not felt the need to take action, leaving these problems unaddressed for over a decade.

The project was also directly relevant to the mandate of the grantee, Sisters in Islam, which had been fighting for the rights of Muslim women based on Islamic principles of equality, justice and freedom since 1988. SIS is a vocal supporter for equal rights for Muslim women and an outspoken critic of discriminatory practices justified through uninformed interpretations of Islam. SIS also provides a legal clinic for men and women on their rights under the Quran and Sharia law and recently started an international Muslim women's network for equal rights in the family called Musawah.



**Announcing the National Convention**

*Source: The Rakyat Post*

The components that intended to raise awareness of the media, youth and the public through a workshop, study tour and public forum respectively were also relevant to the needs to build a more receptive environment for change given the lack of public information available on women's rights under Islam. Most religious authorities in Malaysia have a conservative interpretation of the Quran which has almost become state policy through its political use by some political parties and policy makers to consolidate their positions.

The project though lost relevance during implementation towards its purpose of developing a national campaign towards MFL reform. Factors included the intermittent nature of project implementation, lack of follow up with most workshop participants, and the focus on achieving activity outputs more than on creating a surge in popular support for MFL law based on Islamic principles of justice and equality.

### (ii) Effectiveness

The project was broadly implemented along the lines of the design outlined in the project document and delivered most of the anticipated outputs, but with some major modifications. For example, instead of doing four two-day awareness trainings with grassroots women the project did eight one-day trainings with a variety of different women. It also implemented most of these around the capital area of Kuala Lumpur, with two held in the north. It also moved the

national convention, intended in the design to be held in Year 1, to the end of Year 2. This was as a result of UNDEF questions about the timing for some activities, such as the national convention, which it expected to be the culmination of the project instead of being held towards its start. UNDEF also asked about the holding of a training of trainers (TOT) at the end of a project instead of at the start when the persons' trained in the TOT could then be used to deliver the project's trainings. However, the TOT was still held after the national convention and at the very end of the project.

From the interviews with SIS, it appears they intended to use the national convention as an advocacy tool for the second half of the project and build on the momentum that event would create. They intended to use the resolution endorsed by the convention as a means for the grassroots women to advocate for the reform of the MFL with lawmakers. SIS also intended for the TOT participants to serve as the advocates for the reform rather than as actual trainers for the project.

The SIS had developed this approach and activities years before when it became clear that the MFL amendments would not be tabled without public pressure on policy makers. The UNDEF project was conceptualized as a continuation of this approach, with the funding allowing for a scaling up of its activities and the holding of a national conference. SIS intended to use this project to resurrect the Coalition of Muslim Women's Rights (GAHWI) which it had created several years earlier and use it as a means to advance the MFL reform agenda. This way they anticipated that the grassroots Muslim women themselves would be at the forefront of the advocacy movement, instead of the Sisters of Islam which had acquired a polarizing reputation over the years because of its outspokenness. This had resulted in some closed doors for SIS with some policy makers and government officials, especially after the religious authorities in Selangor, the state where the SIS office is located, issued a fatwa against them in the first year of the project. This religious edict labeling them as "deviants" directly affected the receptiveness of some policy makers to their efforts and limited attendance at their events. At the same time, this prompted some of their critics to come out publically in SIS' defense, saying the fatwa was an unwarranted condemnation of an organization that was only seeking gender equality and human rights that were enshrined in the Malaysian constitution.

The SIS primarily intended for the legal awareness trainings to provide useful information to single mothers on their rights under the Quran and the MFL. SIS used these workshops as a way to introduce participating women to the concept that the Quran provided for the equal rights of women and that the version they had been taught was only one interpretation of the religion. They also intended for the Echo advanced training to continue this awareness raising, and for the TOT to provide yet another layer of knowledge that would be needed for them to become advocates for reform. The SIS saw this awareness raising as a precondition for advocacy and stated that these pluralistic concepts have to be introduced gradually given the context of rising religious conservatism in the country.



**2014 Legal Awareness Workshop, KL**  
*Photo: SIS*



The SIS implemented the project along these lines, and as such reached their objectives of raising the awareness of participating single mothers' on their legal rights and on the concept of the equality of women in Islam. But the project fell short of its ultimate objective of improving the enabling environment for the amendment of the MFL and creating a surge of public voices demanding for law reform because of the activity-based nature of project implementation and the lack of emphasis for the advocacy during implementation.



**National conference, October 2015**

*Photo: Sisters In Islam Facebook*

The SIS expanded the number of legal awareness workshops anticipated in the design because of the high level of demand for this training. They wanted to accommodate everyone. They appeared not to have any selection criteria other than the interest of the women in participating. Some appeared to have found out about the workshops online and applied, while most seemed to be members of the different women's organizations that provided services for single mothers. The workshops were held in one day instead of two because the SIS said they found the grassroots women were busy with work and children. So each workshop was held on a weekend, with child care arranged for in some cases by SIS. It was not clear why this issue had not been identified during the project design stage but since the budget was for two days, there was enough funding available to double the number of these one-day workshops.

"I was very conservative before. I didn't see another framework than Islam. I learned a lot in Indonesia. In Indonesia differences are tolerated. Differences can be discussed in public. Intellectual rigour is more respected in there. In Malaysia we shout at each other. We are not as tolerant."

**Study tour participant**

Six of the eight workshops were held in or near to Kuala Lumpur with two held in the north in Perak and Kedah. These events were held at hotels with some having about 20 to 30 women, while others were larger, such as the one held in Kedah that had 143 attendees. All of the participants were women. The evaluators interviewed a random sample of participants from each training. They seemed to vary from urban professionals to more rural grassroots women and stay-at home mothers.

Most of the women interviewed described similar training content whether they attended the legal awareness workshop, the 'advanced' Echo workshop or the TOT training. This lack of differentiation by the participants was notable since SIS was able to clearly articulate the purpose for each of the different trainings to the evaluators. Trainings appeared to have been based on the content developed by SIS over the years and tweaked as needed by the context. There were no training needs assessments done or curriculum tailored to the different levels of knowledge or education of the participants. There was no written curriculum other than agendas, speakers' notes and sometimes handouts. Some of the more grassroots women felt the theoretical parts of the trainings were over their heads, while the practical information on what to do in court was seen as extremely useful. In particular, the grassroots women liked the question and answer session where they could get the specific answers they sought regarding their own particular cases such as child custody, alimony and child support. Most of the still married women thought the workshops were more useful for single women. The Echo training



appeared to have been the least effective. None of the women interviewed who attended that training could remember much about it. Having a large number of participants, such as the one in Kedah, likely also affected the nature of the workshop and its effectiveness.

The workshops were one-time events for most participants and most said they had not since heard from SIS. More consistent follow up would have been needed to gel these groups into the type of nationwide advocacy network that could create a surge in public demand for law reform. SIS did continue to have some contact with the heads of the different women's organizations from the workshops, seeing them at the Echo training, and then to re-launch the GAWHI network at its national convention. SIS has continued to meet with these women intermittently since the convention, discussing how they should organize the advocacy campaign for MFL reform and the TOT workshop. However, for this group to become a cohesive and an effective advocacy network, a more concerted effort will be needed as the network is not yet functional without SIS initiative and action.

In addition to the workshops with the women, SIS held a media awareness workshop to provide journalists with information on the MFL and the rights of Muslim women in the Quran. Although the SIS had prepared for the media workshop well in advance, and had thought they would receive a good turnout, only 18 journalists registered for the event and only eight actually showed up. The ones who did attend thought the workshop was practical and provided them with information that could help them to understand the issues facing Muslim women because of the problems in the MFL. However, they could not remember much detail about the workshop, also noting the absence of follow up with them afterwards. Continued contact by SIS with the participants, and even with those who registered but did not show up, could have increased the effectiveness of this element by reinforcing workshop messages and keeping the MFL issue in the forefront of the media. The journalists did note that more conservative views are reflected in the media in general and that there is a greater fear of speaking out on more liberal issues, so journalists self-censor when it comes to issues such as these. This situation makes the SIS type of events even more important as they provide the media with alternative views and information that journalists can use to more critically assess the situation and reflect in their coverage.

The study tour to Indonesia was also held for 21 persons. This included a few journalists, activists and students. Participants felt that only about a third of those who went really wanted to learn about religious pluralism but said that this was a much better way to reach youth than through workshops which spoke to those who were "already converted" to a more open and pluralistic perspective. They felt that by the end of the tour two-thirds of the participants had learned a lot about different points of view. However, they also noted that perhaps the focus



**SIS briefing of the Gender Caucus, April 2014**

*Photo: SIS*

should have remained on women's rights issues under Islam, rather than the broader concept of gender rights. They felt that some in the group could not accept the larger concept of diversity that included issues of gay marriage and LGBTI (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersexed) rights which was apparently also discussed during the tour. One of the participants remarked that Indonesia was much more tolerant of religious differences and thought the tour

was well organized, visiting different institutions and speaking with some prominent intellectuals. But he also said there was a lack of follow up after the study tour except for when they were invited by SIS to attend talks by visiting scholars from Indonesia. He wished that the SIS could have initiated discussion groups among students on university campuses as a follow-up, which to him was the most important aspect of the activity. This particular youth has his own blog with 3,000 followers and wrote articles about the trip that were published on a free speech public website, Projek Dialog, which is supported by the international NGO Article 19. Apart from articles written during and after the trip by some of the participants, there did not appear to be a sustained effort to write about the trip or the issues by the participants or by the project to follow up with them to continue the discussion or to bring them into an advocacy network. Like some of the women workshop participants, some of the study tour participants have remained in contact with each other through social media groups formed on Facebook or Whatsapp.

Some of the Indonesian contacts were also brought to Malaysia to serve as resource persons during the women's workshops under the project. According to the SIS, this was done frequently in the past as they felt the Indonesians embodied the aspect of tolerance and intellectual dialogue. However this aspect was not evident in the project design or budget description. The participants of the various events did praise the capacity of the resource persons used by SIS for the project, especially a retired Sharia judge and Mufti from Terengganu whose practical knowledge on court procedure and cases was seen as extremely useful by the single mothers. The SIS staff themselves were also perceived as experts on the topic of Islam, the MFL and the rights of Muslim women.

The national convention was held towards the end of Year II. It was held at the Renaissance Hotel in Kuala Lumpur which has large conference facilities and is centrally located. Since the SIS intended for the GAHWI women to be the facilitators for the meeting and to serve as the public face for the effort to reform the MFL, it held two-days of preparatory workshops to ensure that the 19 women knew their roles and the material that would be presented. Although this was also not anticipated in the project design, they felt this would increase the professionalism of the conference and ensure its smooth operation. However, on the day of the event, only four opposition MPs attended the convention. The reasons for the lack of attendance by the ruling party and government officials varied between interviews and reports. In the SIS report on the convention they stated that they invited 50 MPs and only the opposition MPs replied. In interviews, the evaluators heard that others said they intended to participate but were unable due to an emergency meeting that all were required to attend. The evaluators requested meetings with some of these government officials and MPs to find out their views on the conference and need to amend the MFL, but only the opposition MPs responded. These MPs felt it was important to discuss the problem of women and gender discrimination but noted that there was a general fear among politicians and the population to voice different opinions as they would then be branded as too progressive or liberal. They mentioned that a Sharia judge was not promoted to the Sharia high



**Registration for the national convention**

*Photo: SIS*

court as a result of defending the SIS publically, as well as some members from a conservative political party who were “kicked out” for the same reason.

The forum was to serve to showcase the problems with the MFL but also was intended to be used an advocacy tool with the government and policy makers, and their absence completely undercut this purpose. However, their absence also gave the attending women a renewed sense of purpose and determination, especially since they had prepared for two days before the convention to ensure a professional presentation.

The participants drafted a public letter to the officials who did not attend, telling them they had done a disservice to the Muslim women of Malaysia and how it reflected a government that did not take their issues seriously (text box). The letter was well written and heartfelt which ended with an agenda for action<sup>5</sup> but it was unclear how widely publicized this letter was. It seemed to be a good advocacy tool that the groups could have used effectively to generate public support for the affected women and to build public pressure on policy makers to make needed changes. However, no immediate follow up to the convention was evident such as advocacy meeting to discuss the letter with officials. In fact, it was difficult for the team to determine whether the letter had actually been sent then, and to which offices/officials as the persons interviewed had different versions about this. If it were submitted, it was not a significant enough effort to have been noticeable. SIS wanted the grassroots women to lead this effort, but they were not sufficiently mobilized or organized to have done this. This led to a loss of momentum for the project and advocacy efforts. The TOT, that was to organize the subsequent advocacy effort, was not held until three months later, reportedly because the grassroots women’s organizations wanted it held after Christmas. This late scheduling was one of the main reasons why the SIS asked for a two-month time extension for the project.

“We are a group of grassroots women with family problems that relate to the Islamic Family Law gathered from 10 states from all over Malaysia... we are deeply disappointed and saddened that none of the representatives from the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, National Department of Sharia Court, Selangor Department of Sharia Court and the Department of Islamic Development did not come to our convention. This reflects how the government does not take our issues seriously. Your absence shows that this government does not care about the people, especially women who are abused and neglected. Who else should we turn to solve this systematic problem and laws that discriminate against women?”

**Extracts from GAHWI’s open letter**

**(iii) Efficiency**

The events seemed well organized and the SIS staff and resource persons knew what they intended to cover in each activity and how they wanted to do it. Some of the factors that affected the efficiency and effectiveness of the project were beyond their control, such as the fatwa that affected their operations and reception to their activities, including the UNDEF-funded ones. However, other factors appeared to be related to the way the SIS saw the UNDEF project as a means continue and expand its activities, rather than being conceived as its own entity with its own purpose, timeframe and intended outcomes. The synergy of efforts between an organization’s every day activities and its project activities is essential to ensure that a project contributes to the grantee’s mission and fits in with its vision. But at the same time, not enough differentiation between the two can result in the loss of focus on the project as a

<sup>5</sup> Meetings with authorities in all 13 states and that government officials be ready to work with them and other NGOs to assess the problems and find solutions.

development tool intended to achieve a specific outcome and instead ends up being used as a donor funded check list of institutional activities.

SIS appeared to have been understaffed during the project and used the same persons for most of its activities. No full time project manager was foreseen to be hired or seconded in the design whose only job would have been to ensure the implementation of the project and the follow up to its activities which would have provided the programmatic glue for this project between the different events held. Instead the budget foresaw two half-time SIS staff persons and some administration time. This was insufficient for an efficient implementation of a development project for this magnitude, especially when the grantee did all of the activities itself and all with face to face methods. This limited the amount of time and effort that could be spent on each component, which is evident in the level of results. The grantee appears to have operated on smaller amounts of funding before the UNDEF grant that seemed to be provided for their core operational costs and which allowed for some activities to be held. If they had a larger project, with project funded staff, specific development objectives and outcomes, it was not evident during the evaluation. This likely meant that they were unfamiliar with development projects and practices which explain some of the issues with the project design and the changes required during implementation. The design also grossly underestimated the level of effort and continuity that a project would need to provide to create a nationwide advocacy network that could effectively generate the scale of public support that would be needed to affect legal reform in an unfavorable climate.

The actual SIS' intent for the project activities was also not clear from the project document and the evaluation team expected to find a much more robust advocacy campaign undertaken for the duration of the project. Some of this stems from their use of some common development terms to mean different things than one would normally expect, such as using training of trainers to mean developing advocacy skills for the women they expected to lead the advocacy effort, or using the term grassroots as a catch all label for their target group of single mothers. However, SIS itself had an extremely clear view of what they wanted to accomplish and how they wanted to do this with the UNDEF funding.

SIS also was under attack for most of the project period from religious conservatives and others.<sup>6</sup> These problems also diverted SIS' attention from the project as, according to one former staff member, it was continually fighting fires. During the project it also held large fund raising events, all of which would have distracted its small team of staff from project implementation.

The SIS board reportedly changed the SIS management and administrative structures towards the end of the grant. The executive director went on to the private sector, although she is still active as a resource person for SIS events. A supervisor was hired to oversee finance and operations. The programme staff seemed to be organized according to functional areas, such as legal and communications. From a project perspective, this system of staffing would have also needed a dedicated project manager who could ensure the overall coordination of the project's implementation and make sure it was on track, met its targets and made progress towards achieving its intended outcomes. This is difficult to do for a person with other major responsibilities within the institution.

SIS used some strategic approaches to its work, such as using the Joint Action Group for Gender Equality (JAG), which is a group of women NGOs, and of which SIS is a member, to promote some of the issues that were common to all women, such as domestic violence. This collective action made that effort much more difficult for the authorities to ignore. This common

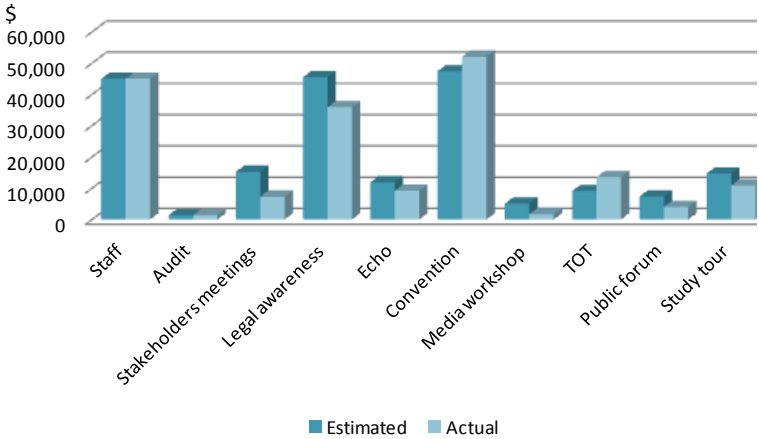
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<sup>6</sup> Some thought that some of this stemmed from its participation in the 2013 United Nations Periodic Review which made SIS a target as the only Islamic NGO participating in this critical review of government action.



topic was also used as the basis for the speeches in the public forum. SIS also wanted to use GAHWI in this same manner to advance the MFL reform agenda since some doors were closed to it because of its outspokenness, especially after the fatwa. However, SIS is still the driver for the GAHWI efforts, and for it to have become an efficient and effective means to achieve the project’s intended outcomes, the effort would have needed to have started at the very beginning of the project, rather than towards the end in a convention or TOT workshop. Had the SIS intention for these activities been clearer in its design, it is likely that UNDEF would not have requested that the national convention be pushed back to the end of the project and perhaps more results would have been visible by the end of the project.

**Figure 1: Project Budget and Expenditures**



SIS reporting was professional although it lacked disaggregated and results-level data. SIS did have disaggregated data available when asked, and provided annexes to its reporting that included workshop reports, workshop agendas, information on problems encountered and meetings held. SIS was also able to immediately provide the breakdown of its expenditures by the programmatic line items used in the project document’s budget. SIS did require a two month no-cost time extension for the grant, saying the GAWHI members wanted to hold the TOT after Christmas, and that they also wanted the time to follow up with the openings found with the state government in Sarawak. However, because the convention was anticipated to have been the second milestone event, upon which the second tranche of funding was to be released, SIS had trouble expending the required 70 percent of funding from its first tranche when the convention was pushed back. This level of expenditure is required in order to receive the next tranche of funding. SIS was supposed to receive its last tranche of funding of USD 22,500 based on the holding of the revised milestone (TOT) but in January 2016 UNDEF decided that there was not enough time left for SIS to expend the remaining amount and withheld payment of the last tranche. Thus, the total amount received by SIS from UNDEF for this project was USD 180,000.

The funding that was spent was done largely along the anticipated lines in the project budget (Figure 1). The project staff salaries accounted for 25 percent of the project’s budget. The national convention used up almost 30 percent of the project funding, followed by the legal awareness workshops at 20 percent. The Echo and TOT workshops accounted for 10 percent of the expended funds and the study trip to Indonesia took six percent. Meetings with stakeholders accounted for only four percent of the expenditures with the public forum and media workshop at two and one percent respectively.

The expenditures were sufficient for the project to deliver its intended outputs, and in the case of legal awareness to double the number of expected trainings because of their shortened duration and also from a stronger USD against the Malaysian ringgit. SIS also found other donors to supplement project funding, in the case for equipment used for this project, and also to co-fund the study tour to Indonesia where the costs for overnights had been underestimated

in the project document.<sup>7</sup> But the level of effort expended for the advocacy and public voice elements of the project needed to have been strengthened considerably for the project to have been able to make a significant contribution towards its objective of a surge in public voice demanding for law reform.

There was little to no UNDEF branding visible for this project. The grantee felt using the UN logo in the Malaysian context would further exacerbate the perception among some in the government and the conservative Malays that the SIS was a liberal organization, and therefore a deviant organization. The SIS reputation did make it difficult for it to work in some cases, but in other places under similar contexts, grantees have been able to leverage their UNDEF funding and the UN's global reputation for impartiality and support for human rights to improve its standing among government and political figures and to garner more respect for project activities.

**(iv) Impact**

The impact of this project is difficult to assess. The SIS did have a performance monitoring plan outlined in the project document that they followed and reported on. However, most of the data collected and results reported were at the output level. The performance monitoring plan included pre- and post-surveys of workshop participants to measure the level of increased knowledge and support for legal reform. SIS handed out post-workshop questionnaires that asked participants what they thought about the workshop and what they learned. This is useful to find out how the participants viewed the workshop effort and the elements they thought were important. But it is not enough to be able to measure increased knowledge or level of support for reform. To capture this, a pre- and post-tests of knowledge, attitudes and practices (KAP) of the participants needed to have been administered to measure the changes.

Similar before and after measurements would be needed to measure other indicators, such as the extent that participants were able to think critically about religious dogma. A baseline would have been needed to be done on those issues and then repeated at the end of the project in order to determine if any changes had occurred, and the extent of those changes. If larger public surveys on the same issues are also done regularly by any organization, that data could also be used to determine changes in public opinion on the project topics.

“I wish there were more workshops like this, so more women could benefit from it. Most important, was that this workshop taught other women about court procedures. Before that women did not know how to argue. This workshop taught them how to articulate and what words to use. When I am selling food from my stall by the road I encounter other women in the same straights. I try to talk to them and share the information.”  
**Legal Awareness Participant**

The project had three expected outcomes: increased awareness of rights among women at the grassroots; increased public discussions on religion; and, increased engagement and dialogue between women's groups and government stakeholders. From the anecdotal information provided during interviews, it appears that this project achieved most of its results at the activity level, but that the level of effort and programmatic continuity between events was not enough to achieve the higher level results. The SIS is still one of the few voices demanding reform of the MFL and the number of participants who had a change of opinion and the number and type of advocacy meetings held were too limited to be able to overcome a lack of political will for legal reform. The overall situation today remains largely as it was at the start of the

<sup>7</sup> The Fredrick Naumann Stiftung Foundation has provided core support for SIS for several years at about USD 20,000 a year. Other SIS donors during the project included the Australian Embassy that funded some of the meetings in Sarawak.

project. At the same time, it needs to be asked what would have happened if the project had not been implemented. Given the context, it seems likely that the space to discuss Muslim’s women’s rights would have closed further without the SIS activities to help keep it open. It also seems likely that the project:

- **Provided a safe space for women to discuss their problems** during the different activities and events. This allowed for women to hear what others had gone through and to find strength through collective voice. Some said that they did not feel so alone after meeting with the other women and hearing their issues. This also **increased the voice of women** on this issue, as discussions on Islamic law in Malaysia are primarily dominated by males. The audience for this voice though seems extremely limited;
- **Kept the issue of women’s rights under Islam and the MFL reform in the public arena** during the holding of their events and meetings through the press coverage of their activities, social media and participant blogging. Malaysia is regressing on issues related to the rights of Muslim women with issues such as the prohibition of Muslim women in beauty pageants or competitive sports such as gymnastics due to their garments which are perceived as obscene and an assault to women’s modesty, and child marriages where Muslim women are allowed to marry at 16 while men at 18. It is important that the public discussion on women’s rights are held to ensure that the voice of civil society is heard on these issues;
- **Increased the awareness of some women that some religious edicts are open to interpretation and that women have rights under Islam.** This is the first step to critical thinking, and to an assessment of one’s own personal situation and awareness of rights and responsibilities in a democracy. There is little tolerance for discussions in Malaysia about differing interpretations of religion and the rights of Muslim women and children. Increased awareness of such issues can contribute to increased discussion and broadening of the space for dialogue and tolerance;
- **Empowered some participating women**, particularly those with court issues related to marital issues such as alimony, child support and divorce. Information is power and can help these women better defend themselves in court cases by documenting evidence and producing the proper documentation to support their applications, thus increasing their chances for more equal treatment under existing law;
- **Gave some women’s groups, pro-reform media and MPs the language and justifications for reform** that they are able to use in their work, so when the occasion arises, they are better prepared to report on and discuss the issues. As noted by one member of JAG, “we couldn’t grasp these religious concepts on gender without SIS. They are the only ones working on this.” However, Islamic law is not seen as within the purview of non-Muslim Malaysians, who are also the voting minority in the country. So their power to effect change is limited without joining into a broad based coalition that includes the Muslim MPs, since parties are primarily defined by one’s ethnicity and religion; and,
- **Planted the seeds for attitude change** among participants who were new under the project. Those who had participated in earlier SIS work likely already shared their perspectives and understood the need for legal reform, but the information was new to those who had not attended their events before. Several of the women participants said they had passed on the practical information on rights in legal cases to other women in

“The workshops were good as the single mothers could share information among themselves and learned how to make decisions for themselves. Before they thought only men should make the decisions.”  
**Workshop participant**

“I give up on the government. I do it on my own. Why didn’t they turn up to our meeting? I was really sad that day. No one turned up so I could make them understand.”  
**National convention participant**

similar circumstances in their neighborhoods or at work. However, continuing work after the project is needed for these seeds to grow and become a movement.

SIS did report a significant increase in the number of likes on its social media pages over the life of the project. Specifically, its Facebook followers rose from 9,375 at the start of the project, to 92,000 at its end, and Twitter followers from 14,196 to 21,600. Only limited disaggregated data was available, but 20,374 of the Facebook followers were in Malaysia<sup>8</sup>. Attribution to this project however, is not possible without more information on SIS's other activities, including Musawah the international coalition SIS created to address women's rights in Islamic law..

### ***(v) Sustainability***

The project fit the vision and mission of SIS which is still working to achieve legal reform and to promote women's rights under Islamic law. Despite the hardships and constraints encountered, SIS is determined to effect change, mobilize the GAHWI network and improve the rights situation for Muslim women in Malaysia. If the GAHWI network can congeal into its own entity and become more active, this will help to sustain the effort and increase grassroots support for legal reform. SIS still provides free legal advice to individual women affected by the MFL supported through private fundraising.

The knowledge and information passed to the event participants likely will stay with those individuals, especially for the leaders of the different women's organizations who mobilized their members to attend the SIS workshops. Even for those grassroots women who may have been confused by the legal discussions, the experience of meeting with other women who had the same problems as they, and being able to talk directly to a high level official, such as a judge, about their problems, was likely empowering. This experience and broadening of their perspectives can be expected to remain with them. SIS remains a member of the larger JAG women's network which is continuing to work with SIS on the issues of women's rights. Some of the participants from the Indonesian study tour continue to remain in contact with each other to discuss religious and political issues through Facebook as do some of the women workshop participants who remain in contact through Whatsapp.

The media participants and some MPs and officials still have the language and explanations provided by SIS on the issues of Muslim women's gender rights. They can be expected to use these resources when the discussion comes up. It is unlikely though that many of these will generate discussion or action themselves without a substantial push from civil society, the affected women, or the voters.

### ***(vi) UNDEF Value added***

There was **UNDEF-value added** to the SIS effort as it allowed them to expand their activities, undertake the efforts to resurrect the GAHWI network and hold a national convention which they had wanted to do for several years. Donor funding for human rights projects in Malaysia is extremely limited because Malaysia is considered as an upper-middle income country and therefore a lower priority for development assistance. It is unlikely that they would have received the level of funding from others that they received through this grant that would have allowed them to be able to do a programme such as this. The value of the UNDEF funding for democracy activities is that it allows these small NGOs with a vision and a mission to develop their ideas, manage a programme for two years and be able to get their message out to a broader public. This is an opportunity that is not widely available in these middle income countries.

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<sup>8</sup> India and Pakistan accounted for almost 23,500 followers, followed by Bangladesh (5,721), Egypt, Philippines, Nigeria and the US (with roughly 3,800 each) and Indonesia and the UK (with about 2,500 each).



## IV. Conclusions

Based on the evaluation findings, the team concludes:

**(i) The project addressed an important issue.** Support for women's rights issues is important and needed within the context, especially for Muslim women who find their rights more restricted than other Malaysians due to its dual legal system. The country is moving towards more restrictive rights for these women and it is important to keep the space open for discussion and to advocate for their basic gender rights. This conclusion follows the findings on relevance, effectiveness and impact.

**(ii) The grantee was the right organization to support for a project that addressed Islam and women's rights.** SIS was knowledgeable and experienced in the sector and appears to be the only women-led organization working on this issue in the country. There are other voices for reform in the country, but these are primarily male or secular. Even if being on the front lines gave it a reputation for being too outspoken, SIS actions helped keep the space open for Muslim women and for their rights issues to be able to be discussed. This conclusion follows the findings on relevance, effectiveness, impact and sustainability.

**(iii) The project attempted to effect change from the bottom up, but more activities at that level were needed to generate the desired outcomes.** One-off workshops were not enough to create the type of momentum and broad based support needed to develop the objective of a surge in public voice demanding law reform. The TOT component was also not leveraged to expand the trainings and to reach more persons. This conclusion follows the findings on relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability.

**(iv) The advocacy elements in the project were underdeveloped** and needed to have been more aggressive **to achieve the project purpose.** SIS operates in a very difficult environment and is trying to walk the line between raising its issues and not getting shut out by unreceptive authorities and policy makers. It focused primarily on raising awareness so the environment could be more receptive to the idea of change, and towards the end of the project on developing GAHWI to carry the message for reform. But without facing a more robust advocacy effort there was no incentive in the current system for the majority of policy makers to address the issue and undertake this reform. This conclusion follows the findings on relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and impact.

**(v) The legal awareness training was useful for single women, particularly single mothers,** and contained information that helped them fight for their legal rights in divorces and custody battles. But to be an effective advocacy tool, the workshops also needed to include information about the roles and responsibilities of the law makers, how citizens can petition their representatives for change and hold them accountable, and what issues these women should consider before casting a vote in the next election. This conclusion follows the findings on relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and impact.

(vi) There was logic to the sequencing of activities in the project design once it was explained. However, the **project itself was implemented as a series of activities** and would have benefitted from having been delivered as a more integrated and cohesive development programme, with adequate follow up, needs based training and the use of other development approaches. This could have pushed the results up beyond the activity level. This conclusion follows the findings on effectiveness, efficiency and impact.

(vii) **The project might have had more significant results than were visible** to the evaluation team, but **it is not possible to know as results beyond outputs were not tracked**. The indicators in the M&E plan were also not sufficient to be able to measure increases in knowledge or attitudinal changes, especially without baseline and end of project data. This conclusion follows the findings of effectiveness and impact.

## V. Recommendations

To strengthen similar projects in the future, the team recommends:

(i) **Continued support for gender rights** for donor programmes in similar contexts whether within the Islamic law context or around the need to uphold international standards such as those found in CEDAW. This is especially important in cases where the space for gender rights is contracting and civil society groups advocating for equality find it difficult to work. Donor support helps to ensure the organizations are able to work to keep the space open and advocate for change. This recommendation follows conclusion (i).

(ii) **Ensure projects are implemented in a cohesive development manner** that provides sufficient levels of engagement with participants and policy makers for the duration of the project. These include needs assessments for the different target areas and beneficiaries and tailored trainings to the different needs of participants. This will increase the effectiveness of the project and the impact of its activities. There are a number of good donor resources on project design, management and monitoring that can be found on their different websites. These could be used as reference materials for grantees to strengthen their programming. This recommendation follows conclusions (iii), (iv), (v) and (vi).

(iii) **Expand leverage of existing groups and networks to help deliver the project, provide synergistic efforts and help carry the messages** especially when trying to create a nationwide advocacy movement for policy change when the climate is not conducive to that change. There is power in numbers and developing alliances with other organizations working on similar issues can help bring in those numbers. SIS has a unique niche but there are also other existing and experienced NGOs trying to achieve gender equality and legislative reform. All of these organizations could be brought into a nationwide network that delivers the same message through their different channels and constituencies to policy makers. There is more power in collective voices, especially in the lead up to an election year. This also provides a type of cover for public officials who may believe that it is improper to attend an event organized by an organization perceived in some political circles as radical, and

especially by one labeled as a deviant by some religious authorities but who support the cause and want to help. The TOT could also be used to train members of partner NGOs in every state at the start of a project to deliver the project workshops in their areas. This would increase project reach and effectiveness. Harness the power of celebrities and use those that support the effort to provide public service announcements with your advocacy message, with religious clerics to provide the religious message, and secular notables to give the secular argument that all Malaysian women's rights should be respected and equal. Continue to leverage the social media and build an online site for persons to find information on the MFL, join the network, lobby their policy maker, register complaints and endorse legal reform. This recommendation follows conclusions (iii), (iv), (v), and (vi).

**(iv) Take advantage of election years to get commitments from parties and policy makers for MFL reform.** Election years provide many good opportunities to question candidates about their positions on gender rights and to lobby them to include legal reform in their electoral platforms. Linking this issue with the efforts done by the broader coalitions for free and fair election and domestic observers will add weight to the effort and allow for a much broader group of individuals to query candidates about their positions and to extract promises for support- or for reasons why they would not support legal reform. It will also increase the visibility of the key issues with the public which could help provide support and build momentum for a parallel advocacy effort for law reform. This recommendation follows conclusions (iii), (iv) (v) and (vi).

**(v) Continue and expand work with grassroots education** through existing networks, not only for women, but those that deal with social justice issues, education, employment, culture, etc. Simple press releases with the main messages and explanations could be sent to a wide range of NGOs and CSOs electronically on a regular basis for them to distribute to their members. It could also be sent to students and youth organizations for them to post on their social media platforms. This could all be linked to the online site recommended in (iii) above to help expand the reach of project messages and to build a broad based national constituency for reforms. This recommendation follows conclusions (iii), (iv), (v) and (vi).

**(vi) Adopt more performance based indicators** that can be easily collected and tracked throughout the project and use these to make sure the project is on track and reaches its objectives. Make sure baseline and end of project data is collected so that the results of the project can be demonstrated. A five or seven question KAP survey could be provided to participants at the start of the project/activity and at the end to help determine changes in attitudes and practices. This could help measure changes in level of understanding of the key principals of women's rights under Malaysian and Islamic law, or whether women in a divorce are more aware of their legal rights for alimony, child support and custody. Also consider the use of existing public opinion polls, especially for advocacy programmes to obtain start and end of project data. This recommendation follows conclusion (vii).

## VI. Overall assessment and closing thoughts

The necessity and relevance of the SIS work and its impact is evident in its continuing harassment and intimidation of SIS by conservative state and non-state religious actors through such means as issuing a fatwa against them, banning of one of its publications, and filing a lawsuit against them for the misuse of the word “Islam” in its name.

In this extremely challenging environment, from a political, social and cultural point of view, SIS is constantly forced to find the delicate balance between being an effective advocate for religious reform and women’s rights while at the same time not being shut down by conservative reaction to its work.

It also appears that the problems faced by the Muslim women in Malaysia are not only rooted in Islamic laws, but also in the constitutional system, meaning its one country with two separate justice systems and the treatment of women when it comes to matters of Islam. As such, it is important for human rights organizations working on such issues to not only address the symptoms of the problems but to also work together within the broader human rights movement to identify and address their root causes to help find a lasting solution.



**Participants, National Conference October 2015**

*Photo: SIS*

## VIII. ANNEXES

### Annex 1: Evaluation questions:

DAC criterion	Evaluation Question	Related sub-questions
Relevance	To what extent was the project, as designed and implemented, suited to context and needs at the beneficiary, local, and national levels?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Were the objectives of the project in line with the needs and priorities for democratic development, given the context?</li> <li>▪ Should another project strategy have been preferred rather than the one implemented to better reflect those needs, priorities, and context? Why?</li> <li>▪ Were risks appropriately identified by the projects? How appropriate are/were the strategies developed to deal with identified risks? Was the project overly risk-averse?</li> </ul>
Effectiveness	To what extent was the project, as implemented, able to achieve objectives and goals?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ To what extent have the project's objectives been reached?</li> <li>▪ To what extent was the project implemented as envisaged by the project document? If not, why not?</li> <li>▪ Were the project activities adequate to make progress towards the project objectives?</li> <li>▪ What has the project achieved? Where it failed to meet the outputs identified in the project document, why was this?</li> </ul>
Efficiency	To what extent was there a reasonable relationship between resources expended and project impacts?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Was there a reasonable relationship between project inputs and project outputs?</li> <li>▪ Did institutional arrangements promote cost-effectiveness and accountability?</li> <li>▪ Was the budget designed, and then implemented, in a way that enabled the project to meet its objectives?</li> </ul>
Impact	To what extent has the project put in place processes and procedures supporting the role of civil society in contributing to democratization, or to direct promotion of democracy?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ To what extent has/have the realization of the project objective(s) and project outcomes had an impact on the specific problem the project aimed to address?</li> <li>▪ Have the targeted beneficiaries experienced tangible impacts? Which were positive; which were negative?</li> <li>▪ To what extent has the project caused changes and effects, positive and negative, foreseen and unforeseen, on democratization?</li> <li>▪ Is the project likely to have a catalytic effect? How? Why? Examples?</li> </ul>
Sustainability	To what extent has the project, as designed and implemented, created what is likely to be a continuing impetus towards democratic development?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ To what extent has the project established processes and systems that are likely to support continued impact?</li> <li>▪ Are the involved parties willing and able to continue the project activities on their own (where applicable)?</li> </ul>
UNDEF value added	To what extent was UNDEF able to take advantage of its unique position and comparative advantage to achieve results that could not have been achieved had support come from other donors?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ What was UNDEF able to accomplish, through the project that could not as well have been achieved by alternative projects, other donors, or other stakeholders (Government, NGOs, etc.).</li> <li>▪ Did project design and implementing modalities exploit UNDEF's comparative advantage in the form of an explicit mandate to focus on democratization issues?</li> </ul>

## Annex 2: Documents Reviewed:

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Moustafa, Tamir, 'Islamic Law, Women's Rights, and Popular Legal Consciousness in Malaysia', *Law and Social Inquiry*, Volume 38, Issue 1, 168-188, Winter 2013.

Projek Dialog, *Salah faham terhadap kesetaraan gender*, 28 May 2014  
<http://www.projekdialog.com/featured/salah-faham-terhadap-gerakan-kesetaraan-gender/>

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The Rakyat Post, *Sisters in Islam continues to fight for justice for women*, 19 September 2015,  
<http://www.therakyatpost.com/news/2015/09/19/sisters-in-islam-continues-to-fight-for-justice-for-women/>

UDF-MAL-12-512, *The National Campaign towards Muslim Family Law and Reform (MFL Campaign) in Malaysia. Project Document*, 14 January 2014

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UDF-MAL-12-512, *The National Campaign towards Muslim Family Law and Reform (MFL Campaign) in Malaysia, Milestone Verification Report #2*, 24 November 2014

UDF-MAL-12-512, *The National Campaign towards Muslim Family Law and Reform (MFL Campaign) in Malaysia, Milestone Verification Report #3*, 2 November 2015

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UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, *35th session, Concluding comments of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women: Malaysia* (CEDAW/C/MYS/CO/2), 31 May 2006

Women Living Under Muslim Laws, *Sisters in Islam*, <http://www.wluml.org/action/malaysia-family-law-bill-unjust-malaysian-muslim-women>



## Annex 3: Persons Interviewed

29 May 2016	
Arrival international consultant	
30 May 2016	
Rozana Isa	Executive Director, Sisters in Islam
Rosezaini Mansor	Finance and Operations Manager, Sisters in Islam
Azareena Abdul Aziz	Senior Programme Officer, Sisters in Islam
Syarifatul Adibah	Senior Programme Officer, Sisters in Islam
Adila Aziz	Programme Officer, Sisters in Islam
Meera Samanther	Associations of Women's Lawyers (JAG)
Goh Siu Lin	Associations of Women's Lawyers (JAG)
31 May 2016	
Aidila Razak	Journalist, Malaysiakini
Mohammad Jimadie Shah bin Othman	Editor, Malaysiakini
Omnas Sreenivas Ong	Honorary Secretary-General, National Council of Women's Organisation
Suriani Kempe	Programme Manager, UNDP, Milestone Verifier
Saira Shameem	Programme Adviser, UNFPA, Milestone Verifier
Tengku Aira Tengku Razif	UNFPA, Milestone Verifier
Megat Abdul Al-Hanis	Columnist for Projek Dialog
1 June 2016	
Norazun	Member, Association of Single Mothers for Kuala Lumpur and Selangor (by phone)
Juwairiah Kamaruddin	Member, Association of Single Mothers for Kuala Lumpur and Selangor (by phone)
Intan Khairani binti Jemain	Copywriter, unattached to a NGO (by phone)
Baayah Ahmad	Member, Association of Single Mothers for Kuala Lumpur and Selangor (by phone)
Bijan binti Mohammad Maidu (Kedah)	Member, National Association of Women Institute of Malaysia (by phone)
Norasma binti Halim (Kedah)	Member, National Association of Women Institute of Malaysia (by phone)
Hadira binti Mohammad Isa (Kedah)	Member, National Association of Women Institute of Malaysia (by phone)
Aini Juliana (Perak)	Legal Clerk, Syamsuriah and Associates (by phone)
Khalid Samad	Member of Parliament
Siti Mariah Mahmud	Member of Parliament and Parliamentary Gender Caucus
Ratna Osman	Former Executive Director, Sisters in Islam
2 June 2016	
Melissa Mohammad Akhir	Senior Advocacy Officer, Women Centre for Change
Mariam Abdul	Member, Association of Single Mothers of Mutiara Kuala Lumpur and GAHWI
Mastura Janjori	Member, Association of Single Mothers of Selangor (by phone)

Raunah Mohammad Isa	Member, Association of Single Mothers of Kedah and GAHWI (by phone)
Tony Pua	Member of Parliament
3 June 2016	
Azizah Abdullah	Member, JUWITA (by phone)
Nik Elin Nik Rashid	Founder, WIBAWA (by phone)
Norazah binti Nordin	Member, Welfare Association of Women's Drivers of Malaysia (by phone)
Hajjah Chek Puan Hassan	Member, Association of Single Mothers, Parliament of Kedah (by phone)
Emma Mohammad Yusri	Legal Officer, Department of Women and Family of Sarawak (by phone)
Wan Zumusni Wan Mustapha	Member, Kelab Warisan WIBAWA (by phone)
Yuslinda Mohammad Yusof	Member, Resident's Association of Air Panas, Kedah (by phone)
Salbiah Abdul Hamid	Member, Association of Single Mothers of Melaka (by phone)
Rozana Isa	Executive Director, Sisters in Islam
Rosezaini Mansor	Finance and Operations Manager, Sisters in Islam
Azareena Abdul Aziz	Senior Programme Officer, Sisters in Islam
Zainah Anwar	Board Member, Sisters in Islam and head of Musawah



## Annex 4: Acronyms

CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
CRPD	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
GAHWI	Coalition of Muslim Women’s Rights
IFL	Islamic Family Law
JAG	Joint Action Group for Gender Equality
KAP	Knowledge, Attitude and Practices
KL	Kuala Lumpur
LBGTI	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersexed
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
MFL	Muslim Family Law
MP	Member of Parliament
SIS	Sisters in Islam
TOT	Training of Trainers
UNDEF	United Nations Democracy Fund
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
USD	United States Dollar