INTERNATIONAL ACTION NETWORK FOR GENDER EQUITY & LAW

Bismil-laah ir Rahmaan ir Raheem (In the Name of God, the Most Merciful and Gracious, the Most Compassionate and the Dispenser of Grace)

I would like to express my gratitude to the International Action Network for Gender Equity & Law and its Founder and President Nancy Newman, for the 2019 Amel Zenoune-Zouani Rights & Leadership Award. I would also like to thank Professor Karen Torjesen who has been the Margo L. Goldsmith Chair of Women's Studies in Religion at Claremont Graduate University, for nominating me for the Award. Karen is a dear friend with whom I share the passion to keep striving for the rights of women, especially those who are manifestly disadvantaged in the communities to which they belong.

We are here this evening to honor the memory of Amel Zenoune-Zouani, 22 year old, third year law student at the University of Algiers, who was killed on January 26, 1997. It was the 17th of Ramadan - a day known as Ghazwat Badr in commemoration of the first victory of the nascent Muslim community in Medina over its powerful opponents from Mecca in 623 A.D. Amel who lived in the dorm boarded a bus for Sidi Moussa to visit her family. The bus was intercepted by assassins from the Armed Islamic Group who forced Amel to disembark and then slit her throat. Undoubtedly, the untimely and brutal death of a beautiful young woman at the hands of a fanatic, extremist group in Algeria is cause for intense sorrow as well as anger. But the question I would like to raise is this: Are we here today just to mourn for Amel and denounce her killers or is there a deeper purpose for this gathering?

My answer to this question comes from my own life experience as a Muslim woman born in Pakistan, educated in England, who emigrated to the U.S. in 1972. Experientially I have always known what it means to be a Muslim woman – I come from a Saiyyad family descended from the Prophet Muhammad, (pbuh) was born in Lahore, an historic Muslim city, in Pakistan, a country created in the name of Islam. (One can't really get any more Muslim than that!). I grew up in a patriarchal culture in a most unusual family – my father was a saintly but traditional man who believed in arranged marriages for daughters at age 16; my mother was an ultra-radical feminist (much before this term was invented!) who believed that daughters should be educated and become independent. The fundamental clash between my parents had profound impact on me and made me decide at age 12 that in order to escape the fate of my two older sisters who had been married at 16, I had to become a rebel and to say "No" to everything my father expected me to do. In

order for you to understand why at age 75, I am still compelled to say "No" to much of what I see in Muslim communities across the world, you would need to know a lot more about my life than I am able to narrate in the brief time allotted to me this evening.

I will, therefore, confine myself to sharing with you a few moments of my life that led me to be here today. In 1974, when I was teaching at Oklahoma State University in Stillwater, I was appointed Faculty Advisor to the Muslim Students Association on that campus. Members of this Association all happened to be Arab men who were so patriarchal in their attitude that they did not permit women to attend any of their events. (You can imagine how thrilled they were to have me as their Faculty Advisor!) This MSA had a tradition of holding a seminar in the Fall and it was customary for the Faculty Advisor to make a few preliminary remarks at the start of the seminar. However, I was told to talk about "The Role of Women in Islam" which was not the topic of the seminar because in their opinion I was not qualified to talk about anything else even though I taught Islamic Studies. I was affronted by the insinuation but accepted the invitation mainly because I had come across so many writings - books, articles, brochures – on the subject of women's role in Islam almost exclusively written by men, and felt that it was important for me to speak at this meeting of patriarchal men who believed that hearing the voice of a woman unrelated to them was "*haram*" (mortal sin!)

Reflecting on what I wanted to say, I decided to talk about the Qur'anic perspective on women since the Qur'an was the highest source of authority in Islam. I did not know then that this decision would determine the course of my life. My focused study of the Qur'anic texts pertaining to women made me aware of the huge discrepancy between their import and what was actually happening to women in Muslim cultures. It also made me aware of how many things had happened to me because I had been born in such a culture.

As a Professor of Religious Studies I knew that all major religions of the world had developed in patriarchal cultures and that the interpretation of their sacred texts had been the exclusive monopoly of men. I had no model that I could follow in my endeavor to understand the Qur'an from a non-patriarchal perspective. Furthermore, in 1974 there was no other Muslim who was engaged in such a task with whom I could collaborate. I had, therefore, to develop my own hermeneutics which consisted of three principles – linguistic accuracy, philosophical consistency, and the criterion of justice. The last one – which I regarded as the most critical one – was based on the cardinal Muslim belief that God is just. If the Qur'an is the Word of God as Muslims believe, then it must reflect the justice of God. This

meant that any interpretation of any Qur'anic text which seemed unjust even from a human standpoint could not be accepted as valid.

For a decade -1974 - 1983-84 – my Odyssean quest for self-understanding became central to my life. I studied the Qur'an primarily to make sense of my own life as a Muslim woman. During that time I became convinced that the Qur'an did not discriminate against women. In fact, recognizing their vulnerability in a culture where female infanticide was practiced, the Qur'an was extremely protective of women's rights. My research in this decade marked the beginning of feminist theology in the Islamic tradition. Knowing that the overwhelming majority of Muslim women were not aware of their God-given rights, I felt driven to share my findings with other women, especially in Pakistan.

In the wake of the Islamic Revolution of Iran in 1979, a number of Muslim countries began to institute new laws with the professed purpose of making their countries more Muslim. This process was called "*Islamization*" in Pakistan whose military ruler General Zia ul Haq promulgated laws whose primary purpose was to diminish the humanity of women through a systematic reduction of their legal rights. In the wake of these discriminatory laws there was a spectacular increase in violence against women. This caused deep consternation amongst women activists who were mostly secular and Westernized, with little knowledge of Islam. Though I lived in the U.S. I visited Pakistan regularly and happened to be there in 1983 – 84 when I was approached by some women activists who knew about my work in the area of Women in Islam. They said that they were unable to counter the avalanche of religious rhetoric which was being used to justify manifestly anti-women laws and actions and asked me to help them by providing an Islamic basis for their protest movement. This was a defining moment for me – when I had started my private study of the Qur'an in 1974, I could not have dreamt that exactly ten years later I would be asked to develop an Islamic theology which could serve as the foundation for Muslim women's struggle for justice, equity and equality.

The challenge to become the theoretician for Muslim women's liberation movement was formidable in many ways, but I had no choice other than to accept it. I knew that the best hope for liberating Muslim women from the chains that shackled their bodies, hearts and minds lay in the unequivocal Qur'anic affirmation of their fundamental rights. Building my theology on this belief, I have shared the most compelling case I could make with women from many countries. From 1984 onwards I have traveled extensively talking at many fora ranging from community-based meetings to World Conferences in Cairo and Beijing, pointing out the critical

need for educating Muslim women about their God-given rights. Pursuit of this cause has been the sacred commitment to which I have devoted the greater part of my life. Despite the dangers and difficulties that were an inevitable part of challenging the sacrosanct citadel of male privilege in Muslim cultures, I feel immeasurably gratified to see an increasing number of Muslim women understanding the Qur'anic message of equality and getting ready to be counted.
Reflecting on my life-journey I identify strongly with the concluding lines of a memorable poem by Robert Frost in which he says:

> Two roads diverged in a wood, and I -
> I took the one less traveled by,
> And that has made all the difference.

Having shared with you some glimpses of my life, I return to the question I had asked at the start: Are we here today just to mourn for Amel and denounce her killers or is there a deeper purpose for this gathering? In responding to this question I would like to focus on two challenges. The first is a challenge to Muslim women, and the second is a challenge to all of us.

How is Amel's story a challenge to Muslim women? Amel had a passion for education and went to the university to become a lawyer. Unfortunately, the Islamic
Armed Group which was terrorizing the region where she lived regarded women's higher education as an anathema, and killed Amel to send a dire warning to other women who dared to do what she had done. In recent decades, Muslim women have suffered unspeakable violence at the hands of a number of extremist groups including the Taliban and ISIS, which - like the Islamic Armed Group - regard themselves as the guardians of what they call "true Islam." The story of Amel, of her mother who sent three daughters to the university in very dangerous times, of her younger sister who followed up on her sister's dream to be a lawyer, illustrate the indestructible courage of those Muslim women who risk their lives but do not give up their goals. Amel is a model for all Muslim women – not only those who live in areas of armed conflict but also the millions who live under patriarchal oppression. The spirit of Amel challenges all Muslim women to fight for their fundamental rights and not give up or give in even in the toughest of times.

What is the challenge of Amel's story to all of us? I believe that the best way to honor Amel is to support what meant more to her than her own security. Karima Bennoune, the recipient of last year's Amel Award, interviewed Amel's mother who

told her that shortly before her murder, Amel, trying to alleviate her parents' anxiety about their three daughters studying at the university, had said to her: "Nothing will happen to us, *Inshallah*. But if something happens to us, you and Dad, you must know that we are dead for knowledge. You and Father must keep your heads high." I believe that a befitting way to honor Amel is to support what she lived and died for. I would like this organization and its supporters to consider setting up a scholarship in her name which would be awarded annually or bi-annually to a Muslim woman preferably from a region of the world where women face extraordinary difficulties, to enable her to study in the US.

The Qur'an tells us that those who die as martyrs live forever. Amel, the valiant woman who was a martyr for a most worthy cause, will continue to be a source of hope and fortitude to all seekers of knowledge.

Dr. Riffat Hassan
at IANGEL's 6th Anniversary Dinner
April 15, 2019