

Zainah Anwar Oral History Content Summary

Track 1 [duration: 20:44] [Session one: 27 May 2013]

[00:00] Zainah Anwar [ZA] Describes family background, one of three children, father's previous marriage, three further siblings, 24-year age gap between parents, father born 1898, living to 100. Humorous attribute of own feminism to mother's long home life. Describes family as small by Malaysian standard. Describes patriarchal set up, father's character as proper and strict. Describes mother's attendance of domestic science school. Father political secretary to Chief Minister to the State of Johor, Malaysia. Describes parents' meeting, mother previously married with two children, prematurely deceased.

[05:33] Describes mother teaching Johor ladies cooking and sewing, equipping them as wives of country's civil servants. Discusses mother's hard work into her 70s and ZA not wanting a life like hers, observation on era, mother's interest in medicine. Mother pressuring ZA to buy house to secure independence and avoid marriage, mother's description of marriage as 'slavery', ZA's recognition of her as feminist.

[10:12] Describes sister as brilliant student, becoming Head of Securities Commission, Malaysia, marrying successfully, giving ZA freedom to not conform. Describes brother as successful artist. Comments on all three achieving mother's wish of financial independence. Discusses feminist beginnings of seeing gender roles in household, constantly questioning. Describes lack of nurturing responsibility in brother, freedom to play outside the house with no contribution to household.

[15:43] Describes rebellious stance at school. Discusses pedagogy of teaching at all girls school in Malaysian Asian culture, feudal relationship between teacher and pupil. Mentions Stamford Raffles. Describes reading comics as child. Mentions 'Dandy', 'Beano', 'Judy', 'Spider-Man', 'Superman', 'The Elongated Man', Marvel. Observes that American children not raised on Enid Blyton unlike British colonies. Mentions 'Noddy', 'The Secret Seven', 'The Adventure Series', ZA's favourites in primary school. Describes classroom library. Observation that in 1960s only English books read at school, no Malay literature or history of region, country. Mentions John Keats, W.B Yeats, Gerald Manley Hopkins, William Wordsworth, William Shakespeare. [interruption]

Track 2 [duration: 1:30:15] [Session one: 27 May 2013]

[00:00] Describes Malay newspapers and journals in home, mother reading Malay women's magazines, books on health and nutrition. Describes maternal grandmother coming to stay, ZA waking up to the sound of her sweeping. Describes family meals always together, tradition of men eating first. Describes games played among boys and girls.

[05:35] Describes domestic routine around school schedule. Recollection of mother's *biryani* dish, sitting on floor surrounded by two pages worth of ingredients from market.

[08:20] Describes religious practice from early age with daily attendance of religious school, being 'God conscious', importance of dusk prayers at home. Discusses lack of interest in religion. Remarks that nothing negative in teachings, compared to toady's climate. Mentions response to beliefs in Boston, United States of America (USA). Comment on discrimination as related to culture and tradition, not religion.

[13:20] Describes wanting to be journalist from young age, attributing to father's 'addiction to news' and short wave radios all over house, ZA now replacing with web radio. Mentions British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). Mentions 'Life' magazine, 'Reader's Digest'. Story about first exposure to concept of 'inflation', father born 1898 consulting dictionary for meaning. Describes love of football. Mentions Manchester United Football Club, George Best. Describes mother's insistence on university education and ZA's boredom in secondary school, frustration with teaching style.

[20:00] Describes attendance of special college for Malays, part of Malaysian Government affirmative action policy to reach Chinese standard. Study of Journalism at country's first Communications college, with teaching from top professionals in industry, with internships in holidays. Mentions Peace Corps. Describes involvement in student movement and production of weekly student newspaper, offset printing.

[25:52] Describes influence as interest in politics and early sense of 'global' world. Mentions Vietnam war, communist movement in Malaysia, father fan of Winston Churchill, 'Time' magazine, feature story in 'Life' magazine on four-angled bean as future food of poor. Describes interest in going to Boston, USA, as linked to interest in the Kennedys. Story about reaction to Robert Kennedy's death. Mentions Martin Luther King, Robert Vaughn, 'The Man From U.N.C.L.E.'. Study of Journalism at Boston University, 1975. Discusses experience of positive teaching style, challenge of thought. Mentions Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Gustave Flaubert, James Joyce, Igor Stravinsky, Edvard Munch.

[33:40] Describes open conversations on divorce, religion, discovered in international community where closed in own Malaysian society. Describes love of the arts, subscription to Boston Symphony Orchestra, jazz festivals, attending library to listen to music. Describes backpacking in Europe.

[36:33] Describes first involvement with Women's Movement, campaign for law against domestic violence, first feminist group, Malaysia early 1980s. Describes covering rise of political Islam as journalist, previously nationalist Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) taken over, becoming radical Islamist in outlook, ZA's research of impact of clash between party and 'un-Islamic' government in village communities, giving rise to two-Imam mosques, two, government-acknowledged, and Islamic marriage ceremonies, and burial grounds. Explains historical rivalry between two main parties. Mentions that father one of founding members of United Malays National Organization (UMNO).

[44:21] Describes sensational response to ZA's report in broadsheet newspaper, exposing government discrimination of PAS villages, denying basic amenities. Return to Boston, USA, to study Master's at Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, writing

thesis on growth of political Islam movement in Malaysia, publishing book 'Islamic Revivalism in Malaysia' exploring phenomenon, documenting interviews with students exposed to Islamic politics in Great Britain (GB). Comments that radicalism occurred in GB, Malaysian group led by Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim less radical. Describes beliefs of Muslim Youth Group. Mentions further groups returning radicalised from Al-Azhar University, Egypt, University of Madinah, Saudi Arabia.

[49:35] Discusses impact of Malaysian government's affirmative action policy, providing country's top students with scholarships to study in West to return as professionals and leaders, students targets of Muslim Brotherhood and Jamaat-e-Islami activists operating in GB. Discusses Muslim identity and impact on people from urban areas not exposed to religion until later in life. Describes analysis of Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM), 1986.

[54:20] Start of work in think tank focusing on rise in conservatism, discrimination against women, marital issues, abandonment, maintenance, child support, negative response of religious departments and court. Elaborates on own beliefs surrounding God and justice. Describes Malaysian government's comprehensive Islamization policy, start of covering up of women in mid 1980s. Discusses veiling of women as not tradition in Malaysia, mentions women's groups in 1940s and 1950s. Describes scholarship students' return, taking government positions and beginning to change terms of engagement. Discusses principle behind veiling girls age eight. Describes indoctrination at universities where Chinese students dominant, threat of 'hell fire' for each strand of hair shown.

[1:03:40] Describes campaign for law against domestic violence, in 15th year when ZA joined movement, negotiations with government departments, formation of inter-agency committee bringing together Attorney General's chambers, Police, Welfare Department, Religious Department, women's groups including Association of Women Lawyers, to write draft. Describes Religious Department's attempt to restrict proposal to non-Muslims, to preserve husband's right to beat wife. Other focus on Family Law. Describes role as president of Association of Women's Lawyers.

[1:07:19] Describes rights under Islamic Family Law in Malaysia at time. Discusses use of religion to justify discrimination and cruelty to women, personal outrage and conflict with ZA's idea of a just God. Describes re-reading Koran thematically to investigate what actually says, all lawyers in group withdrawing membership at this point. Mentions Rose Ismail. Describes looking at issues of equality, domestic violence and polygamy, to support focus of work. Describes background of Amina Wadud, recruited to teach at newly established government university, Islamic International University, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, working weekly at home with ZA and group of eight women to read Koran.

[1:12:23] Describes methodology introduced for understanding Koran line by line, differentiating universal principles from specifics relating to 7th century Arabia. Describes as liberating experience, discovering heritage supports justice and equality, revelation regarding polygamy. Attributes misrepresentation to patriarchy. Discusses context of the Revelation in time of war.

[1:18:27] Decision to go public on polygamy findings, establishment of Sisters In Islam (SIS). Description of case at Sharia Appeal Court used to propel argument. Story about naming of SIS. Describes adopting name from group Daughters of Islam, met in Lahore, Pakistan. Story about publication in 'The Star' followed by name change to SIS to enable publishing in establishment newspaper 'New Straits Times' and reach policy makers.

Track 3 [duration: 1:10:44] [Session one: 27 May 2013]

[00:00] Discusses impact of SIS letter in society, most important not for successful influence on law reform but for creation of public voice and culture of debate in conservative Muslim context. Comments that 85% of Muslims living outside Arab world, discussing wider implications as members of society where public policy governed by Islam. Reflects on achievement over 20 years of reclaiming authority as women, to speak on Islam.

[06:41] Describes opposition encountered. Launch of two seminal booklets, 'Are Women and Men equal before Allah?' 'Do Muslim Men have a Right to Beat their Wives?' Describes response to launch, eight members of group reflecting diversity among Muslim women.

[12: 20] Demand for change meant accused as infidels. Describes source of funding for booklets with first print 3000 copies. Since translated into several languages. Describes reassessing initial interpretation of verse regarding domestic violence, ongoing journey of discovery of sacred text. Describes cases of women who initially opposed work, seeking advice from SIS. Describes evolution of focus of work.

[18:54] Describes development of training module, training journalists, human rights activists, political party leaders. Describes use of nuanced Koran translations and varied interpretations including conservative Saudi edition. Mentions Mohammad Assad, Youssef Ali. Discusses process involved.

[23:50] Describes expansion to study sessions for wider society. Mentions Women Deliver conference. Discusses role and position of organization over the years, more interest in work of SIS as people question assertions made by extremists, journalists attributing ability to write on issues to training received, non-Muslim members of Parliament able to speak out on Muslim issues, with tools for debate, Islam no longer the preserve of traditional religious authorities.

[29:13] Reflects on how all work evolved as response to status quo, rise of political Islam, Malaysian government's Islamicization policy, introduction of new laws, not planned, but necessary action. Describes creation of gender-sensitive legal advisory services. Describes ten years of working from ZA's home, without salaries, compromising ZA's work as writer. Describes organizing conference on Islam, Reproductive Health and Women's Rights, funding granted by Ford Foundation, and exchange rate enabling establishing office, 1997.

[35:16] Describes establishment of training programme to instill understanding that there is diversity of opinion in Islam. Mentions Toni Kassim. Example of looking at

Family Law in different Muslim countries. Describes development of focus, weekly legal literacy column in highest selling Malay newspaper, 'Utusan Malaysia', leading to setting up gender sensitive legal advisory clinic. Describes work of clinic today, documenting on dominant issue divorce, lack of awareness of rights, bias in courts, illegal polygamy.

[42:12] Describes policy change seen over the years. Comments that first time voices heard and given platform in decision making process. Story about successful lobbying and revolt in Parliament against discriminatory amendments made to Family Law, making divorce easier for men. Describes gender-neutral language used in law, enabling men to share of matrimonial assets too. Describes opportunity for using media. Discusses successful lobbying as no guarantee of change. Observation that once law passed very difficult to amend. Describes working towards holistic reform of Family Law based on marriage as partnership of equals.

[50:10] Discusses global impact of SIS, as only group reinterpreting religion publicly, using media. Mentions Pakistan, Bangladesh, Iraq. Laughs that SIS written about in 'Lonely Planet' travel guide. Coverage 'Time' magazine, 'New York Times'. Describes being invited to women's groups meetings regionally, internationally. Describes hostility encountered from women's groups in South Asian and Arab countries for engaging with religion. Describes 1990s working groups on migration, land rights, domestic violence, ZA's suggestion of group on impact of fundamentalism, political Islam on women's rights, and no one seeing as issue, understanding Islam and patriarchy as problem. Mentions World Economic Forum. Discusses positive Western response to work, attacks and resistance coming from Muslim feminists.

[59:04] Discusses rejection of fundraising proposals from donors whose objective is building women's rights movement. Discusses holistic framework built for Musawa to open space for bridging divides, between Islam and Human Rights, between Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and West, between secular feminists and Islamic feminists, between religious leaders and others. Mentions Arab Spring.

[1:03:02] Describes Hudud law on rape, Zina, examples in Pakistan, Maldives. Discusses importance of recognizing fear of speaking out as strategies Islamists and patriarchs rely on, and knowing that demand for reform not against teachings of God. Describes personal attacks made on ZA by Email, use of pornography, defamation during Friday sermons. Discusses strategy shared in Maldives, to see each attack as opportunity to expand debate.

[1:09:32] Brief discussion on segregation imposed in Kelantan state, Malaysia.
[pause]

Track 4 [duration: 36:51] [Session one: 27 May 2013]

[00:00] Describes creation of Musawah, 2009 further to first SIS training of women leaders from 16 countries funded by Rockefeller Foundation at Bellagio Conference Centre, Italy. Discusses Salafi ideology. Formation of international committee of Muslim leaders facing same issues, from Africa, Middle East and North Africa

(MENA), South Asia, Great Britain, The Netherlands, Canada. Meeting of planning committee, Istanbul, Turkey, 2007 to build movement to develop scholarship and understanding of Islam.

[05:34] Describes spending two years developing Musawah framework for action, foundation of reports from 30 countries (publication 'Home Truths') to ensure ground up movement, development of theory, 'Wanted: Equality and Justice in the Muslim Family'. Describes working with religious scholars and activists, draft after draft, followed by invitation process, cold calling 50 countries, overwhelming response from 48 countries, forced to limit to 250 participants, five day meeting great success, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Comments that a lot of Women's Rights work takes place in West. Describes topics covered.

[09:25] Describes development of Musawah over years. Description of current work on knowledge building, theoretical research on issue of male authority over women, concepts of *qiwamah* and *wilayah*, empirical research documenting life stories of women in 12 countries experiencing it. Describes findings, women often sole providers and protectors, illustrating gap between reality and law, exposing responsibilities assumed as male, on which inheritance rights, right to demand obedience, sex, divorce, founded. Describes capacity building, benefits of training most apparent in activists with knowledge of Human Rights, those who've rejected Islam as non liberating reassessing faith. Expansion to Horn of Africa, Francophone Africa, Anglophone Africa, MENA region, Central Asia, South Asia.

[13:15] Discusses use of The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), Article 16 on Family and Marriage, campaign to pressure CEDAW Committee to challenge governments. Describes research undertaken to examine language used by 42 OIC countries in past five years, launch of report in Geneva, Switzerland, impacting on work of Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).

[16:40] Discusses relationship with Women's Learning Partnership (WLP), enabling ZA platform for meeting Muslim women from Arab world. Remarks on importance of WLP training modules to Women's Rights Movement. Mentions Tolekan Ismailova. Comments on break up of Soviet Union and rise of political Islam in region, loss of socialist equality between men and women, introduction of polygamy. Describes source of inspiration from WLP's Moroccan partners Rabéa Naciri and Amina Lemrini, Association Démocratique du Femmes du Maroc (ADFM) success in obtaining Family Law based on partnership of equals.

[21:37] Discusses importance of WLP's role in translating 'Collectif 95' developed by Moroccans, Tunisians, Algerian women, model followed by Musawah. Discusses experience at World Economic Forum, Davos, Switzerland, enjoyment of breaking stereotypes, demonization of Islam, forces of progress perceived as Western. Mentions 9/11. Discusses Western education of Muslim radicals. Mentions Muslim Brotherhood, Jamaat e Islami activists in Great Britain, Malaysian students ideologically brainwashed.

[27:27] Describes work in Political Affairs Division, Commonwealth Secretariat, London, United Kingdom, 1991-4, sent to African countries in first phase of democratization process. Mentions missions in Zambia, South Africa (covering elections won by Nelson Mandela), Lesotho, Kenya, The Seychelles. Describes role as Human Rights Commissioner of Malaysia, 1999-2003, ending term due to frustrations at Malaysian government's resistance to outcomes for reform, decision to devote time to women's rights.

[32:39] Discusses decision to step down after 20 years at head of SIS to allow next generation to take leadership of movement in more innovative ways. Mentions Twitter, Facebook. Discusses leadership of Musawah at global level. Describes secretariat moving to Cairo, Egypt to contribute tools and concepts in transition to democracy and build Musawah movement in Arab world.

[35:34] Describes future writing plans, currently writing monthly column in 'The Star'.