



#### **4<sup>th</sup> Article – The Way Forward**

Some critics would argue that the WIEF is a ‘talk shop’ that does little to facilitate real change in the Muslim world, in terms of policy, action, and international perception. My argument is that all action starts with talk. If we are not able to communicate with one another, there is little scope for anything else.

But I would also like to add that the WIEF has gone beyond talk. We try very hard to make sense of our dialogue sessions at the forum. WIEF makes it a point every year to structure the dialogue sessions to not only discuss burning issues, but to come out with actionable points. We have organised workshops, created business links and provided a platform for businessmen to meet.

We don’t put a lot of emphasis on immediate economic development or financial targets in front of us. We are more concerned with empowerment. And we want to empower the ummah in the poorest regions of the world. And among the poor we want to focus on the poorest of the poor namely women and the youth. We place a lot of emphasis on education. Education, Education, Education. I cannot stress this word enough. Education is empowerment.

For example in Malaysia education has empowered Muslims to be what they are today. We have Muslim engineers, bankers and lawyers. The WIEF realises that this process of education may take a long time. Maybe even more than than one generation. But then again the WIEF is in no hurry. We are not looking for a quick fix solution but a solution that will last the test of time. We take these small steps in order to achieve our larger steps.

The WIEF wants to educate women. As an example the WIEF ran a workshop for women entrepreneurs in January. We got together something like 15 women from different parts of the world. When I say entrepreneurs they were not the Christy Walton or Oprah Winfrey of the world. But simple women who ran simple businesses. They were not rich or successful. But they knew their market well, they knew what they were good at and they were willing to work hard.

For two weeks we exposed them to modern management techniques, we introduced them to new possibilities, we got them to identify and discuss common interests and areas of business opportunities. It was an interesting gathering. There was one woman from Oman who was dressed in her traditional dress who only spoke Arabic continuously. She enjoyed the experience so much she decided to stay on in Malaysia and take up a crash course in English. This is only a simple example but what I am trying to say is that this would never have been possible without the WIEF. And now we want to expand on these programmes so that these workshops are carried out throughout the Muslim world at the local level where it can reach a larger number of women on the ground.

For the youth the WIEF is always trying to explore new possibilities, how to engage their vibrancy and their energy. We want them to seek out new areas of business. One of the WIEF initiatives

this year is the Marketplace of Creative Arts. We want to celebrate the variety of cultural expressions but more importantly we want to promote the arts as a legitimate industry. So for youth the arts go beyond creative expression, it is a means to make money.

I'm quite happy with the amount of progress that we have made from six years ago. At the same time I am a very conservative man. I've got enough knowledge and experience to say you shouldn't expand to the point where you don't have the capacity. I'm always telling people "Okay, hold on, consolidate, let's see the result." After the 6<sup>th</sup> WIEF is over in Kuala Lumpur I hope to get my advisory panel made up of leaders from different parts of the world to meet and we ask ourselves, "Where do we go from here?" I continuously have this exercise every year.

Government of Islamic countries need to commit themselves and facilitate the programmes of the WIEF, it is the private sector as represented by the business people who will be attending this year's Forum. A record number of almost 2,400 have registered for the Forum, many of whom will be instrumental in driving the aims and aspirations of the WIEF.

We have faith in the business people, their ability to "smell" each other, in a manner of speaking, to spot each other and say, "Ah! There is money to be made here, if we go there, we can meet certain people. We can close certain deals." That's as far as we go, the rest is up to them.

I am sure they will be doing exactly that during this year's 6<sup>th</sup> WIEF in Kuala Lumpur and next year's 7<sup>th</sup> WIEF in Kazakhstan and all future WIEFs.

Together slowly but surely we will create a better world for tomorrow, Insha Allah.