

Family law and why S'pore, Indon Muslims differ

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MUSLIMS in Singapore are “timid” when it comes to debating Islamic family law, unlike those in Indonesia who take a more critical view.

That’s the view of a visiting Iranian academician, legal anthropologist Professor Ziba Mir-Hosseini, who told TODAY: “Even in a *pesantrean* (religious school in Indonesia), the questions that I got from a 12 or 14-year-old girl are different.”

The Indonesians’ ability to look critically at religion, she believed, stems from a position of confidence.

The tendency of Muslim Singaporeans to avoid being critical could be attributed to their minority status.

“It is ironic ... that when Muslims are in a minority, they are afraid

to look at their traditions critically and always feel the need to defend it,” she said.

But this is not good because they can be hostage to “traditionalist and conservative forces” who will say that being critical challenges Muslim unity.

Prof Ziba, who is visiting professor of the Faculty of Law, National University of Singapore (NUS), praised Singapore’s Administration of Muslim Law Act (Amla) as among the most progressive among the most progressive that she has studied.

She believed that there was room for improvement in the area of gender equality — especially polygamy and inheritance. “To some Singapore Muslims, the idea that you can be a good Muslim and believe in equality for women was new,” she noted.

She delivered a lecture at a

university forum on Thursday, titled Gender Equality in Islamic Law — New Prospects, that drew over 100 community leaders, law practitioners, academicians and students. She is teaching legal anthropology as well as Islamic Law and human rights at NUS’ Faculty of Law.

Several in the audience agreed with Prof Ziba. One of them, Ms Mariam Alias, a local community activist and private tutor, said: “When it comes to Islamic family law, many would accept the law rather than question it.”

But she believed that this is due to the progressive interpretation of Islam by religious scholars in Singapore, citing the recent *fatwa* (religious edict) by the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (Muis) to include Muslims in the Human Organ Transplant Act (Hota) as an example.