

الموقع العربي

VIDEO
ABOUT USFREE
SUBSCRIPTION

LINKS

PERMISSIONS

Women's
WeNEWSMake a
DONATION

July 9, 2007

RSS Feed

Culture

Muslim Women Build International Network

Run Date: 07/06/07

By Shahnaz Habib
WeNews correspondent

Muslim women, who will meet in Malaysia later this year, are pursuing a 10-year plan for advancing women's worldwide leadership within Islam. Seventh in a series on women changing religious institutions and practices.

(WOMENSENEWS)--An organized leadership push by Muslim women for Muslim women is taking place, quietly but purposefully.

So far it has a name--the Women's Islamic Initiative in Spirituality and Equity, or WISE--one landmark meeting in November 2006, a major international gathering planned for late 2007, a few declared objectives, plenty of questions and, for one founder, an overriding reason for being.



Brainstorming session
at WISE conference.

"It's embarrassing when the problems of Muslim women are debated in the press without any participation by Muslim women themselves," says Daisy Khan, who spearheaded the group's groundbreaking conference last year in New York. "It's embarrassing for them, and it's embarrassing for us."

The next forum, planned for November 2007 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, is just taking shape.

Shahrizat Binti Abdul Jalil, minister of women, family and community development in the Malaysian government, which will host the event, half jokingly describes it as the United Nations of Muslim women.

So far the group is a gathering of about 200 women; more than half came together for the first conference, led by a coterie of a few leading activists, academics and founding members. A few local chapters have also been set up in various countries, largely through the initiative of conference delegates.

Khan, executive director of the New York-based American Society for Muslim Advancement, says a couple of private brainstorming sessions will take place before the Malaysian meeting and will bring together a core group to finalize internal systems and procedures.

"I think of it as similar to the creation of a national constitution," says

Khan. "There are representatives with different agendas and politics, but it is absolutely possible and necessary for a unified voice to evolve from that diversity."

Challenge and Strength in Diversity

While the group has struggled with the diversity of its membership, members have also celebrated it as a way to demonstrate the diverse lives being led by the world's Muslim women, who are trying to strike a balance between their secular and religious identities, between explaining Islam to non-Muslims and reclaiming faith from the strong patriarchies within the Muslim community.

For a sample of that diversity, consider some of the participants of the group's first meeting in New York:

- A Pakistani TV director who produces music videos, commercials and talk shows on religion;
- A writer who created a teen Muslim super-heroine;
- A Danish politician who writes and speaks regularly about European Islam;
- An activist who is building India's first mosque for women;
- A Dutch-Moroccan singer and composer who founded her own record label;
- Lawyers and academics from the world's best universities;
- A young woman who runs a school and a shelter for the women of her village where she was brutally gang-raped;
- And the first female president of the largest Muslim organization in North America, who happens to be a Western convert.

In 2006, after three days of intense discussions at the New York conference, which was described by one participant as both "draining" and "igniting," they concluded that it was necessary to create a shura--or advisory council--of female Muslim leaders who can adjudicate on global Muslim concerns and issue scholarly legal opinions.

The shura custom dates to a pre-Islamic tribal tradition that was continued by the prophet Muhammad. It can turn Islamic law-making into a consultative process and is a cardinal principle of representative government in Islam, says Sadek Sulaiman, Islamic scholar and the former ambassador of Oman to the United States. Several Muslim countries--Iran, Saudi Arabia, Oman and Egypt, for instance--have incorporated these male-only shuras in some form into their governance process.

Achieving Political Authority

Organized political action by women, especially at this global level, is a remarkable achievement in the Muslim world where religious authority and policy-making power are generally vested in the hands of orthodox scholars and politicians who are not eager to rock the boat.

Creating a Muslim women's shura is therefore an effort by women to reclaim a religious and legal voice. It also would be the first truly

international shura of the Muslim world.

In tandem with this, participants at the conference agreed to create and support within the next decade 10 female muftias, or Sharia scholars, who can analyze and deliver opinions on social and legal issues that affect Muslims.

The group has also dedicated itself to forming a Global Muslim Women's Fund that will support the activities of its network, including providing scholarships to encourage Muslim women to study Islamic theology and jurisprudence.

Like almost any ambitious social justice project, the group faces formidable challenges.

Khan says she was overwhelmed by supporters, but observers expect the effort to face skepticism from hardliners in the Muslim world.

Rebab al-Mahdi, a political scientist at the American University of Cairo, fears that the WISE initiative will be perceived and portrayed by Muslim conservatives as part of a Western cultural invasion.

Abdullahi An-Na'im, an Islam and human rights scholar who teaches law at Emory University in Atlanta, suggests that because WISE was convened in the United States in the current political climate, its ability to command popular legitimacy among Muslims across the world will be severely limited.

Reaching Out to Women

The group, however, hopes to meet its detractors halfway by partnering with traditional Islamic universities and by reaching out to Muslim women in primarily Muslim societies.

"The liberating possibilities of an Islamic discourse are in its remaining popular and diffused, a social movement and not a formal institution," An-Na'im says. "Institutionalized religious institutions will most probably be co-opted and corrupted by the elite who convene and lead them."

The question of representation has been posed from within the group as well.

One of the hottest debates at the group's meeting last year was over the exclusion of men from the shura. If WISE is to be a truly inclusive organization that wants to participate in the mainstream Muslim discourse, some delegates argued, it must include progressive-minded Muslim men who also have a stake in the empowerment of Muslim women. However, the majority of participants felt that this was an undue concession that would water down the power of WISE as a space for Muslim women, by Muslim women, for Muslim women.

It has also become clear that the shura cannot be just a handful of women as originally conceived. In the middle of a heated discussion, a couple of delegates actually stood on their chairs to make this point.

In order to achieve an accurate geographical-cultural representation, they decided the shura would have to be a larger body of between 13 to 15 leaders, actively supported by the group's network of approximately 200 women.

Will anyone take the shura and its opinions seriously?

For the moment, Khan says it is enough to create this space, this symbol of women's wish and need for dialogue. She says women deserve to talk and listen and understand ourselves and our faith better.

Shahnaz Habib is a Muslim woman who has not been circumcised, forced to wear a hijab or denied an education. She writes fiction, literary nonfiction, criticism and poetry, and lives in a state of flux, approximately located in Brooklyn, N.Y.

Women's eNews welcomes your comments. E-mail us at editors@womensenews.org.

For more information:

This series is supported by The Sister Fund.

Women's eNews Series, "Women and Worship: Expanding Sacred Spaces":

<http://www.womensenews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/3232>

Asma Society, Muslim Culture and Arts:

<http://www.asmasociety.org>

Muslim Wake Up:

<http://muslimwakeup.com/>

Note: Women's eNews is not responsible for the content of external Internet sites and the contents of Web pages we link to may change without notice.

Send this story to a friend.

Your Name:
Friend's Email:

To Obtain Permission to Reprint or Repost This Article: :

COPYRIGHT.COM
REUSE THIS CONTENT

For Complete Step-by-Step Instructions: [Reprint FAQs](#)

Copyright 2006 Women's eNews. The information contained in this Women's eNews report may--with the prior written authorization of Women's eNews--be published, broadcast, rewritten or otherwise distributed.

Women's eNews is a nonprofit independent news service covering issues of concern to women and their allies. An incubator program of the International Institute for Community Solutions, Fund for the City of New York, Women's eNews is supported by our readers; reprints and licensing fees; and the Carnegie Corporation of New York; the International Institute for Community Solutions, Fund for the City of New York; the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation; the Barbara Lee Family Foundation; the Open Society Institute; the Rockefeller Family Fund; The Helena Rubinstein Foundation; the Sister Fund and the Starry Night Fund. The donations from readers are critical to our success. Donate now by going to <http://www.womensenews.org/support.cfm>.

Women's eNews subscribers may select whether to receive a daily full text, daily summary or weekly summary. To change your email address, send mail to membersvcs@womensenews.org. To change the

frequency of your mail or to cancel your subscription, send a message to Member Services (membersvcs@womensenews.org) or use our online form: http://www.womensenews.org/update_subscription.cfm

[Home](#) [About Us](#) [Donate](#) [Arabic Women's eNews](#) [Press Release](#) [Sylvia](#) [Links](#) [Contact us](#)
[Search Archives](#) [Subscription and Membership](#) [Pressroom](#) [Help](#)

21 LEADERS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

[REPRINT FAQs](#)

[Make Us Your Homepage!](#)

[sign in](#)

Copyright 2007 Women's eNews Inc.