

THE ASPEN TIMES

Symposium focuses on Muslim women

By [John Colson](#)
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ASPEN — Of all the differences between the Muslim world and the West, perhaps none is more potentially explosive than the roles of women, whether in domestic relationships or in their potential as leaders in Islamic and world affairs.

And that, in part, is to be a topic of discussion in the upcoming symposium at The Aspen Institute, "Women, Islam and the West," scheduled for Aug. 20-22.

The symposium, organized by the Cordoba Initiative, will feature contributions by five female Muslim scholars and leaders, two of whom are often seen in Western news media.

Daisy Khan, head of the American Society for Muslim Advancement, has been a leader in the emerging international Muslim women's movement.

In 2006, Khan, who is Kashmiri-American, was the driving force behind the first international summit, which more than 150 Muslim women leaders from 25 countries attended. She appeared in a recent PBS documentary, "Muhammad - Diary of a Prophet," and her husband, Egyptian-American Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, is a co-founder with former Aspen Mayor John Bennett of the organization sponsoring the symposium, the Cordoba Initiative.

Laleh Bakhtiar, a 68-year-old Iranian-American who recently published the first English translation of the Quran by a woman, has also been in the news recently. The book has spawned a wave of international criticism over everything from the fact that Bakhtiar is not a native Arabic speaker, to her mixed parentage and the fact that she was born in New York City and still speaks with that region's distinctive accent.

Looming large in the controversy over the translation is the fact that she chose a new word for the punishment men may mete out to rebellious wives. For some 1,400 years, the text has been most often translated as permission to admonish, abandon in bed and ultimately "beat" a wife who will not obey her husband's commands. Bakhtiar has concluded, after years of research, that the final punishment, described by the Arabic word "daraba," should translate as "to walk away from" or "to leave" them.

In a telephone interview this week, she said she was not sure if her interpretation is "the first meaning" of the Arabic word, which dates from before Islam. But she noted that, according to Islamic tradition, when the Prophet Muhammad had trouble with his wives, "he never beat them, anyone. ... He went away." By that, Bakhtiar believes, the text means anything from leaving the room for a cooling-off period to walking out of the house for hours, days or longer. She does not interpret the phrase as an invitation to start divorce proceedings.

As for the "beat them" interpretation, Bakhtiar said, "It was just the men who were translating it. No women had looked at it" in terms of writing a new interpretation, although the meaning "has been debated all these centuries." The Quran, she explained, was written down by scribes after being dictated by Muhammad, who could neither read nor write, over the course of 20 years, starting in 610 A.D.

Bakhtiar said that the "beat them" interpretation contradicts another verse in the Quran, which declares that if a wife wants a divorce, the husband should not beat her, as this would only cause further discord in the home, and the Quran "promotes marriage and discourages divorce."

Acknowledging that her translation of the Quran has caused great controversy, she said she has never received a death threat, or been warned to desist in her work or risk have a fatwa [religious edict from an Islamic leader] issued against her.

"That is because I am as much a believer as anyone who wants to issue a fatwa against me," she said. She tells other Muslim women that they must "come from within the tradition and stay within the tradition," or they risk being declared apostates and cast out of the religious community.

Khan



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She said she feels she is a "spiritual advocate" of the Muslim form of feminism, declaring, "It's not that we're against me. ... We're just against the patriarchal, conservative interpretations of Islam."

Also scheduled for the symposium is a showing of the film "Enemies of Happiness" and a panel discussion among the five Muslim women and the audience about such issues as political change, cultural evolution and women's leadership roles in the Islamic world.

The film will show at 5:15 p.m. Aug. 21 at Paepcke Auditorium. It deals with the life of a Malallai Joya, a young woman who ran for a seat in Afghanistan's parliament in 2005, and won the world documentary prize at the 2007 Sundance Film Festival.

Tickets to the film and panel discussion are \$10, and available by calling the Aspen Music Festival Box Office at 925-9042.

The symposium, scheduled for two morning sessions on Aug. 21 and 22, is open to the public, with a registration fee of \$500. To register, visit www.aspeninstitute.org/wiwregistration, or call Cristal Logan at the Aspen Institute (544-7929) or John Bennett at the Cordoba Initiative (618-4433).

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