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Wife of 'ground zero mosque' imam epitomizes Islam's modernizing voice

Daisy Khan, wife of Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, spoke to the Monitor in 2006 about her efforts to bring women's perspectives into Islamic law, particularly on issues such as domestic violence and divorce.



Daisy Khan, co-founder of the Cordoba Initiative, speaks at a rally in support of an Islamic center and mosque near the World Trade Center on Aug. 5, in New York.
(Frank Franklin II/AP)

By [Ben Arnoldy](#), Staff writer
posted August 23, 2010 at 5:18 pm EDT

New Delhi

One of the leaders of the proposed Islamic center and mosque near Ground Zero has spent years trying to amplify the voices of educated women within Islam. In this way, [Daisy Khan](#) epitomizes the so-called "moderate Muslim" and modernizing force from within Islam that some Americans are impatient to see.

Ms. Khan is married to [Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf](#), head of the organization [Cordoba Initiative](#) that is proposing to build the controversial community center known as [Park51](#) about two blocks away from the site of the former [World Trade Center](#).

I met Khan in 2006 at an [international conference in New York City](#) that she had organized. The conference brought strong Muslim women from 25 countries to hash out plans for a council of female Islamic jurists, known as muftias or muftiyyahs. These women jurists would be capable of issuing fatwas, or religious rulings.

As I wrote at the time, their idea was "to ensure that women's perspectives on Islamic law become part of religious deliberation in the Muslim world – particularly on issues such as domestic violence, divorce, and inheritance."

Some of the delegates at the conference had already succeeded in fighting for women's rights within the religion. One, [Zainah Anwar](#), used her Koranic scholarship to rebuff efforts to exclude Muslims from a domestic-abuse law in [Malaysia](#).

Khan explained to me the muftia effort, saying: "[Islam](#) is a religion of law, and it is important to express the principles of social justice within the framework of Islamic law." She added: "This is why we need muftias, in order to do that. Otherwise, it falls on deaf ears."

The conference led to the creation of the [Women's Islamic Initiative in Spirituality and Equality](#). This group, known as WISE, notes on its website that 18 of the bottom 25 countries on the [World Economic Forum's](#) 2009 Gender Gap index are Muslim-majority countries.

"Although these women's lives are influenced by a complex interaction of religious, cultural, social, economic, political, and other factors, Islam wields enormous influence, and it is drawn upon to both empower and oppress women. Thus, reframing women's rights within an Islamic framework and approaching the numerous factors that disempower women must be addressed directly and collectively."

WISE took as its first project a [detailed argument](#) (pdf) against both domestic violence and violent extremism using Islamic scholarship. [Next topics](#) for the group include female genital cutting, honor killings, and child marriages. The [training of muftias](#) remains a work in progress as WISE finishes a curriculum and looks for partners.

However, small numbers of muftias are emerging in the Muslim world. Last month, the prime minister of Malaysia [announced](#) the appointment of two women to the country's Islamic court.

Today, Khan remains a member of the steering committee for WISE and is executive director of the [American Society for Muslim Advancement](#). She blogs at [The Washington Post's](#) "[On Faith](#)" section.

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