

Bid To Bring Female Voice To Islamic Law

Muslim Women From 25 Countries Meet In New York, Forming Council
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Muslim women from 25 countries met over the weekend in New York to talk over plans for an all-female council that would weigh in with its interpretations of Islamic law. **(Christian Science Monitor)**

Quote

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Daisy Khan, executive director of the American Society for Muslim Advancement

Pennsylvania's Wharton School of Business. "Otherwise you end up with a very sexist bias in the readings."

The number of women officially sanctioned to issue fatwas is hard to pin down, but certainly tiny. The emergence of such women, known as muftias, usually makes headlines: A religious school in India installed three in 2003, and the Turkish government last year hired two assistant muftias, its first. Governments and schools try to license who can issue fatwas, but Islam stipulates only certain prerequisites, such as knowledge of the Koran and Arabic. As a result, the ranks of unofficial authorities are deeper and the barriers to women surmountable.

Whether the opinions of a women's council will carry any weight, especially in conservative cultures, is another matter. Its advent is proving to be controversial even among Muslim women who share many goals of those launching the council.

"Advancing the idea of reinterpreting the texts has to be done, but I am totally against this initiative because it will have negative effects," says Rebab al-Mahdi, a political scientist at the American University in Cairo. It will be portrayed as part of "a Western cultural invasion," she adds. "This is what conservative clerics always say, and people listen."

(Christian Science Monitor) This article was written by **Ben Arnoldy**.

For centuries, devout Muslims have looked to the fatwa — an opinion based on religious reasoning of a learned individual or committee — for direction on how to resolve moral dilemmas ranging from the mundane to the sublime. And for centuries, Muslim women have conceded the ground, for the most part, to the men who issue these opinions.

That's beginning to change.

Meeting in New York over the weekend, Muslim women from 25 countries began laying groundwork for the first international all-female council formed to issue fatwas. Their idea: 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.

"There's this growing sense on the part of literate Muslim women ... that there is a vital need for women to confront the Islamic tradition and to work on a par with men in interpreting the sources," says Ann Mayer, an expert in Middle Eastern law at the University of

For others, doubt is mingled with hope.

"I share some cynicism, but at the same moment, symbols are sometimes important," says Pakistani-born Asma Barlas, a politics professor at Ithaca College in New York and a prominent advocate of jettisoning what she calls male-centric and incorrect interpretations of the Koran. "These little steps, ... even if they don't change anything, do send a message that women are getting together and trying to make their voices heard."

The group is also up against the inertia of tradition. Throughout history, few Muslim women were prominent jurists, though scholars are uncovering more, including, some say, Aisha, the prophet Muhammad's wife. Some question whether much within the religion is open to new interpretation and, by extension, reform. Others note that fatwas are nonbinding and may have little effect on civil law and state judgments.

Still, Muslim women have recently brought change by citing the Koran and other Islamic sources:

- In Malaysia, a group called Sisters in Islam used Koranic scholarship to rebuff efforts to exclude Muslims from a domestic-abuse law.
- In Saudi Arabia, an effort this summer to push women further back at a crowded holy site in Mecca was thwarted with the help of a female Islamic scholar's arguments.
- In the United States, the forthcoming English translation of the Koran by a woman, the first ever, finds an alternate meaning in a verse widely interpreted to give husbands authority to beat their wives as a last resort.

The New York gathering, called the Women's Islamic Initiative in Spirituality and Equity, plans to seat the new council — perhaps seven members — within a year. Drawn from diverse schools within Islam, the members will be versed in Islamic law. The group also plans to give scholarships for more women to pursue advanced training — open to women in places like Morocco, Egypt, and Iran — in an effort to broaden the qualified pool.

"Islam is a religion of law, and it is important to express the principles of social justice within the framework of Islamic law," says Daisy Khan, executive director of the American Society for Muslim Advancement and leader of the effort. "This is why we need muftias, in order to do that. Otherwise, it falls on deaf ears."

Traditionally, religious legal authority was local, vested in muftis and other leaders who attained their status via government appointment or community esteem. But today's global communications are challenging that, as more Muslims seek religious opinions far and wide through the Internet. The women's council takes advantage of this: Its members will be in different places, taking questions and conferring over the Web.

Given this wider marketplace of ideas, the new council's credibility will be determined by the quality of its legal reasoning, and whether its logic strikes a chord, say several scholars and observers.

"There is a sense among many Muslims — particularly, but not exclusively, women — that Islamic jurists are out of touch, that their guidance is not adequate to the modern world. And if this shura council succeeds in bridging that gap, it may be speaking to an audience that doesn't currently consider itself bound by the pronouncements of existing groups," says Kecia Ali, assistant professor of religion at Boston University.

"But this is going to be a tremendously challenging task because religious authority, even scholarly authority, has always been contested," she adds. "It is in matters related to women,

marriage, sexuality that Muslim intellectuals on both conservative and modernist sides of the spectrum have chosen to wage their epic battle."

For others, the council has a credibility problem right out of the gate. "It should not have happened in New York, because it will set back the agenda of women given the current political upheaval [over the Iraq war]," says Mohammad Reda, a Syrian-American Muslim in the Boston area often sought out for his religious opinions. He supports the idea that "women should stand up and give their own opinions on women's issues," but says American efforts to force change in the Muslim world, as in Iraq, mean reformers now must avoid links to the U.S. The New York conference used money from nongovernmental foundations, some based in the U.S.

Conference attendees say a muftia council could prompt wider support for women's struggles. "The women who we're trying to help, for them religion is very important," says Zainah Anwar, head of the Malaysian group Sisters in Islam. "It's empowering for them to know that their desire to not be beaten by their husband can actually be justified in the name of Islam."