

Muslim feminists in NY want to start Koran council

By Manuela Badawy

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Muslim feminists from around the world vowed to create the first women's council to interpret the Koran and overcome two stereotypes about their religion: Muslims are terrorists and Islam oppresses women.

The women's council was among the most groundbreaking ideas introduced at a weekend meeting of more than 100 leaders in the fledgling Islamic feminist movement.

Many in the newly formed group, the Women's Islamic Initiative in Spirituality and Equality, or WISE, said strict sharia law was not divine because it was created by men and should be changed to incorporate women's rights.

"In our societies men hold power and they decide what Islam should mean and how we can obey that particular understanding of Islam," said Zainab Anwar, executive director of Sisters in Islam, a Malaysian organization working on women's rights within the Islamic framework.

"I can't live with a God that is unjust," she said. "The law is progressive, but those men controlling the law aren't."

Daisy Khan, director of the American Society for Muslim Advancement, or Asma, said she hoped to create a fund to provide scholarships for Muslim women to study Islamic law so they could form a Shura Council of Women, the first with women interpreting the Koran.

The women also want to break down myths that exist, particularly in the West, said Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, Asma Society founder.

'MISCONCEPTIONS'

"Two misconceptions about Islam are that it is associated with terrorism and that Islam is an oppressor of women. These are two myths that we seek to demolish. We need to change the perception of Islam in the West and this cannot be achieved without the participation of women," said Abdul Rauf.

The religious leaders, human rights activists, scholars, politicians agreed that education was essential to breaking down barriers between genders and generations.

"Education is the solution and the answer to finding ways to break the barriers," said Wendy Chamberlain, deputy U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees based in Geneva and former U.S. ambassador to Pakistan.

"We must make laws work for us. We must make democratic institutions work for us," Chamberlain said.

Baroness Uddin, the first Muslim woman to enter the House of Lords in Britain, agreed that women needed to take control of their own destiny, come together and empower other women.

"If Tony Blair and George W. Bush can get together and go to war, just imagine the power of peace that women can bring," Uddin said.

Marie Wilson, president of The White House Project, which tracks and promotes women in leadership positions, said women must have critical mass to make change.

"Never apologize for being 'for women.' Women in any country are the government in exile, and we should be the government in power," Wilson said.

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