

## **This weekend Muslim women take matters into their own hands**

By Pamela K. Taylor

This weekend in New York 100 Muslim women activists, artists and scholars, including myself, will meet with the express purpose of developing forums and structures to empower Muslim women to play a greater role in their societies worldwide.

Called [WISE: The Women's Islamic Initiative in Spirituality and Equity](#), the conference is a forum for Muslim women leaders to:

- discuss global Muslim women's issues
- assert our rights through the use of and in accordance with Islamic law
- build a coherent movement that empowers and connects Muslim women everywhere.

One item on the agenda is the formation of an International Shura Council of Muslim Women. A Shura Council is an advisory body that interprets Islamic law for the political and religious leaders in its region of authority. Also under discussion will be the creation of a global fund to provide scholarships for Muslim women to be educated in Islamic jurisprudence, thereby qualifying them to serve on the Shura Council of Women.

I have some concerns about this council. The current plan is for it to be made up of six women. That's not very many. I would have gone for 10 at least and preferably 12. With only six, it is more difficult to ensure a diversity of opinions, which as far as I'm concerned, is essential to the operation of any such body.

Also, when the proposal speaks of being educated in Islamic jurisprudence and qualified to serve on the Shura council, that raises alarm bells for me.

Will a degree in theology from a Western university count, or does the woman have to go to a Middle Eastern country for her education? If a Middle Eastern trip is required, that would make it virtually impossible for most of us to qualify. Few women can just drop family and career for two or three years to study overseas, even with scholarships. Furthermore, will self-educated women be seen as qualified as are self-educated men -- men like Jamal Badawi who is an internationally recognized scholar despite having no Islamic degrees?

And if you have to be qualified at an accepted Islamic university, then what is the likelihood that this Shura council will challenge standing interpretations that are terribly prejudicial against women?

Amazingly, thousands of women demonstrated in support of the sheikh who compared women to uncovered meat and hundreds of women protested Pakistan's recent decision to remove rape from a legal code that allowed women who were raped to be prosecuted and imprisoned for the crime of committing extra-marital sex. (!!)

These women insisted that

rape deserves the same punishment as voluntary fornication! As if rape weren't a punishment to begin with!! If the council works to maintain male hegemony and traditional interpretations, then it could quite possibly do more harm than good.

However, I am hopeful that all of these concerns will prove fruitless, especially as they are shared with quite a few other women who I know and who are attending. The very fact that progressive Muslim women who buck traditional interpretations have been invited is a good sign, indeed!

Other discussion items will be:

- the major obstacles facing Muslim women and the creation of strategies to address them
- how to increase women's religious & political leadership via faith-fueled activism
- challenging local customs that impinge on women's rights
- developing effective methods to change negative perceptions about Muslim women.

I'm even more hopeful on these fronts, though I don't expect there to be any overnight changes. Still, organizations such as this can be very empowering to Muslim women. By focusing the community's attention on some very basic issues which plague many parts of the Muslim world, I hope we can be agents for positive change.

At the very least, it's absolutely essential for Muslim women to stand up and say: "Enough is enough. Women deserve better, and I will not stand by idly while my sisters are harmed."