

Al Arab Al Yawm: Interview with Daisy Khan

You have been lately honored as one of the 21 Leaders for the 21st Century? What does this recognition mean to you?

Being given this award means the world to me. Of course, my work and activism stems from my personal passion for the issues. Still, to have this work recognized, and to be recognized with other remarkable women leaders, is an honor.

However, in addition to this personal feeling of satisfaction, I was encouraged by the extent to which the award's organizers were aware of the activism within the American Muslim community. I think it's easy for Muslims abroad to think that American attitudes towards Islam are either uninformed or worse. In my experience, however, the vast majority of Americans – Muslims or otherwise – are very eager to support my efforts. This award only confirmed this observation.

What are the reasons behind establishing WISE? What did you hope to achieve with such a gathering? How many members does it have?

After 9/11, Americans became more curious about Islam, and they would ask me, “Why is it that women are often treated so poorly in Muslim countries and communities?” While I disagreed with this generalization, I had to admit that many of my Muslim sisters were suffering from gender-based discrimination and even violence. As I continue to grow in my knowledge of Islam, I became increasingly certain that this situation had nothing to do with my religion and everything to do with the lack of understanding of Islam. For example, I read about the economic leadership of Khadijah, the political activism and religious knowledge of Aisha, and the thousands of Muslim women who transmitted *hadith* throughout history. This only reinforced my conviction that the widespread marginalization of women in Muslim contexts bore no relationship to Islam itself.

Muslim women must be full participators in all levels of society: political, economic, religious, social, and familial. I founded the Women's Islamic Initiative in Spirituality and Equity (WISE) to do just this. We have built a global, diverse, and holistic movement that recognizes the many factors that contribute to Muslim women's struggle, and we utilize our large global network of Muslim women to confront these challenges. In 2006, nearly 200 women from 26 countries gathered in New York City, and in 2009, we will hold another conference in a Muslim-majority country with 300 women attending.

As opposed to other initiatives that ignore the role of religion, we speak within an Islamic rights framework that responds to our contemporary societies. In this struggle, I have been comforted by the fact that gender equality is an intrinsic part of my Islamic faith, and that as women, we hold fundamental and irrevocable value and rights in Islam. We must lift up the truth of Islam, a truth that has inspired positive social change for fourteen hundred years. Together and *as women*, we can realize our full potential as human beings. Our diverse network of Muslim women leaders is generating a powerful collective genius, passion, and energy to pursue positive social change in our Muslim communities.

How will the members of WISE spread the message of your goals?

The success of WISE is tied to our network, as we simply attempt to promote and support the women already active on these issues. These women are established grassroots activists, academics, philanthropists, and leaders within their own communities committed to improving the position of Muslim women. In addition, our message will be spread through the use of technology; specifically, we are creating the first ever global women's portal.

You were born in Kashmir, India; how does this affect you as a Muslim woman living in the USA?

I found my faith in America, and I feel perfectly comfortable practicing my faith and advocating for the Muslim community in this country. That having been said, I always say that I am a highly unlikely candidate for this role. As you mentioned, I was born in Kashmir, and throughout my childhood I discovered the value of celebrating multiple cultures and honoring all religions, and this prepared me for my future life and activism in the US.

I immigrated to the US at age fifteen. Consistent with the common immigrant experience, I focused my energies on education and establishing myself in this country. Therefore, I began a successful professional career as an interior architect. In fact, I rarely even thought of myself as a "Muslim woman." I was simply an American woman, born in Kashmir, who believed in Islam. I was truly living the American dream; what else did I need?

My life changed dramatically after September 11th, when I felt God, my country, and my community calling me to step up. As with many Americans, this tragedy engendered a great deal of internal reflection and soul-searching, but for me, it was more personal. I began to sense the deep responsibility of what it meant to adhere to the same faith as that of the perpetrators of this crime. For the first time, my identity as a Muslim was no longer neutral for many people, and this forced me to reconsider both what it meant to be American *and* Muslim.

I had already co-founded the American Society for Muslim Advancement (ASMA), but 9/11 really made our goals and work at ASMA even more urgent. After years of volunteer work, I quit my corporate job and dedicated myself full-time to community service and building a movement for positive change amongst Muslims. The American Muslim community felt vulnerable and isolated, and through my work at ASMA, I strove – and continue to strive – to forge an American Muslim identity that combines the best aspects of being both American and Muslim. My vision of Islam is one based on cultural and religious harmony. I became a warrior for interfaith dialogue, building bridges between Muslims and the general public and working towards unity across religious communities, in an affirmation of tolerance and peace.

In addition, as Islam came under the radar, my identity as a Muslim *woman* was challenged. As a result, I committed myself to the causes of Muslim women, both here in the US and internationally. This was the impetus for WISE.

You said in an interview that "WISE plans to establish a global Shura Council."

The Shura Council is one of our projects I am most excited about. The basic idea behind it is: Muslim women should not be excluded from the very debates that most affect their lives. My

primary conviction is that we Muslim women must be at the forefront of the debates surrounding our rights, responsibilities, and status.

Yet in so many places, we continue to struggle. Though I certainly recognize that gender-based inequality is not limited to Muslim women, we face it in particular. In fact, 17 of the 25 lowest-ranking countries on the World Economic Forum's *2007 Gender Gap Index*, which ranks women's participation in society, are Muslim-majority countries. At WISE, we recognize that while numerous factors contribute to this situation, distorted religious interpretations continue to destroy the lives of Muslim women. Meanwhile, Muslim women are drawing upon Islam to strengthen themselves and their communities. Therefore, it must become part of the solution.

The Council is global and comprised of Muslim female scholars and activists from across the lines of nationality and the various schools of thought within Islam. It will demand women's rights within an Islamic legal framework, issue informed opinions and religiously-grounded arguments on issues of relevance to Muslim women. I believe that Islam, if properly understood, can improve women's lives, grant them increased rights, and afford them the opportunity to make dignified choices in their personal, familial, and societal lives.

In addition, the Council will establish training programs in Islamic law. Short-term programs will produce women able to apply Islam to the specific on-the-ground issues they face on a daily basis. Also, we are creating a body of women jurists educated in Islamic law *and* secular disciplines of relevance. These *muftiyyas* will be capable of issuing *fatwas* that can guide Muslim women in their own societies. The most exciting part of this project is that a number of eminent male scholars have approved and embraced our idea.

Do you find any objection from other Moslems woman as you do not wear the hijab?

Of course, some Muslim women may object to me not wearing the *hijab*; most, however, are very supportive. I am not someone who condemns or promotes the *hijab*, but rather, I believe every individual must act in accordance with Islam's vision of modesty, which I support wholeheartedly.

Basically, I think this issue is much over-debated. People should be judged on their deeds, and for me, Muslims – even conservative Muslims – recognize my hard work for the Muslim community, and they judge me on the merits of my proactive work. As Muslims, we face major problems today: war, poverty and inequality, lack of unity, disempowerment of women, and many others. Today, therefore, our focus must be on fixing these crises and less on the outer expressions of faith.

Do you have any kind of mutual relation between you and other Moslems women in the Arab world?

Definitely. We have allies throughout the Arab world, particularly Morocco, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the Palestinian Territories. For example, we've been working with a local Egyptian organization to close down FGM operations in the Cairo area. We offer the men who perform FGM operations incentives to stop their activities. They sign a contract – which includes a penalty condition – stating that they will no longer engage in FGM; in return, they are offered a soft loan until they are able to find alternative sources of income. Because these men view the

practice primarily as an economic opportunity, this allows them to purchase new equipment or create an alternative source of income, thus providing for their families without performing FGM. In addition, the organization provides extensive educational information on both the medical harms of FGM and the ways in which this practice contradicts Islamic tenets.

As I said, we have connections and partners across the Arab world. Personally, however, I view the struggle of Muslim women to be one common fight to gain the recognition and rights granted to us in Islam. We're all sisters of the one *ummah*, despite our national, ethnic, or ideological differences.