

## Women welcome female muftis in Syria

Syrian female graduates of Islamic law colleges being trained to counsel women on religious matters.

DAMASCUS - Syrian women have largely welcomed the news that female muftis are to be trained up to fill a role that has generally been monopolized by men.

Several local and foreign Arabic-language news sites reported earlier this month that Grand Mufti Ahmed Badr Hasun, the top Muslim cleric in Syria, announced that female graduates of Islamic law colleges are being trained to become muftis who will counsel women on religious matters.

Hasun also made it clear that some female muftis would be appointed to the Iftaa Council, a body which he chairs and which oversees the issuing of fatwas, or religious edicts.

Muftis are Islamic scholars who are empowered to provide religious guidance on personal and political matters. Until now, women in Syria, as in many countries, have had to turn to male muftis even when their concerns are gender-specific or personal.

"Iftaa [the giving of counsel] is a difficult task and a huge responsibility that men are barely able to hardly shoulder," said a 41-year-old devoutly Muslim woman from Damascus countryside.

"Iftaa for women's matters is a good thing. It saves women being embarrassed about issues such as marital relations and other things that they are sensitive about, like menstruation. "

Hasun made the comments during a visit by American academics to Damascus, but it was not the first time he has discussed the program for women muftis. According to a February 2006 report by the United Nations Development Program, Hasun told representatives of this UN agency of plans to appoint two female members of the Iftaa Council, and said women had served as muftis in earlier times. The news was not widely reported in Syria or abroad.

Hasun repeated the case for female muftis when he met the US scholars, and reportedly said dozens of women were being trained.

A male teacher of Sharia or Islamic law at a Damascus high school, speaking on condition of anonymity, welcomed the decision.

"Women are permitted to be appointed muftis under Sharia," he said. "In Islamic history there have been a large number of female muftis and jurists."

He said that female muftis must fulfill the same requirements as men by demonstrating the right level of knowledge of Islam, having a reputation as a pious individual, and receiving official permission to issue fatwas.

The decision is not expected to be controversial in Syria, as it comes from the top of the official Muslim clerical establishment.

A 22-year-old female student of Islamic law at Damascus University said the decision "pushed forward the rights that Islam accords to women, and elevates them as a result".

Civil society activists generally welcomed the announcement but said women should be placed on the same footing as male muftis.

"From our point of view, it's essential that women participate in fiqh [interpretation of Islamic law] and fatwa," said Bassam al-Qadhi, director of Syria's Women Watch.

But he added that the decision, as reported, "implies discrimination".

"Women will only be able to give religious guidance for women and on specific issues, while men will still be able to provide guidance for both men and women," he said.

Rather than use muftis, some devout Muslim women prefer to rely on their own resources.

One 49-year-old gynecologist from Hama, for instance, said she would not be going to a female mufti for religious guidance, just as she has not consulted male muftis.

"I believe in thinking and using reason instead of referring to others in my life and religion," she said. "I can refer to books on fiqh when I face a problem."

Aisha H.L. al -Adawiya  
Executive Director  
Women in Islam Inc  
POB 814 Lincolnton Station  
New York NY 10037-0814  
URL: [www.WOMENINISLAM.org](http://www.WOMENINISLAM.org)

Women In Islam Inc is a 501(c) (3) non-profit, educational advocacy organization focused on Human Rights and Social Justice.