

First Woman Fatwa Council Planned

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CAIRO — Muslim women activists from several world countries are planning to launch the first international all-female council to issue fatwas, drawing immediate support from some experts and suspicions from others.

"Islam is a religion of law, and it is important to express the principles of social justice within the framework of Islamic law," Daisy Khan, the project's manager, told *The Christian Science Monitor* on Tuesday, November 21.

"This is why we need muftias, in order to do that. Otherwise, it falls on deaf ears," added Khan, the executive director of the American Society for Muslim Advancement.

The unprecedented council was born at a two-day meeting of more than 100 Muslim women scholars and activists in New York on misconceptions about the status of women in Islam.

Participants included Baroness Uddin, the first Muslim woman to enter Britain's House of Lords, Ingrid Mattson, the first woman president of the Islamic Society of North America, and Massouda Jalal, an Afghan pediatrician and political activist.

The new council is projected to comprise seven members specialized in Shari`ah and hold its first session within a year.

It would give scholarships for more women to study Shari`ah in countries like Egypt, Morocco and Iran, according to the newspaper.

"We feel there are many Muslim women who are coming of age who have the scholarly background to be able to step up to the plate to speak authoritatively about it," said Khan.

Equality

Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, founder of the American Society for Muslim Advancement (ASMA), said the new council would help remove stereotypes about Islam in the West.

"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," he told Reuters Monday.



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The council was welcomed by experts as a step towards greater equality between men and women in the Muslim world, said *The Monitor*.

Ann Mayer, an expert in Middle Eastern law at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School of Business, spoke of a growing sense on the part of literate Muslim women "to work on a par with men in interpreting the sources."

"Otherwise you end up with a very sexist bias in the readings."

Pakistani-born Asma Barlas, a politics professor at Ithaca College in New York, pins high hopes on the new council.

"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," she said.

Kecia Ali, assistant professor of religion at Boston University, said woman scholars could bridge the gap between lay people and jurists.

"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," she said.

Islam does not restrict the women's contribution to *da`wah*.

It rather encourages both men and women to do their best in conveying the message of Islam in many ways.

Credibility Problem

But for some unveiling the council plan from the United States is enough to raise questions over its credibility.

"It should not have happened in New York, because it will set back the agenda of women given the current political upheaval," Mohammad Reda, a Syrian-American Muslim in Boston, told the paper.

He supports the idea that "women should stand up and give their own opinions on women's issues."

But Reda has strong reservations about a council launched from the US, which suffers an image problem in the Muslim world for trying to impose its reform recipes there as in Iraq.

For the past five years, the Bush administration has been championing a "democracy" drive worldwide and a global "war on terror."

It launched the Greater Middle East Initiative – which was renamed later to the Broader Middle East and North Africa – provoking an outcry from many governments in the targeted countries where anti-American feelings were and still running high over the US-led occupation of Iraq and Washington's bias towards Israel.

"Advancing the idea of reinterpreting the texts has to be done, but I am totally against this initiative because it will have negative effects," said 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."

