



WISE STORIES OF IMPACT: JAMILA AFGHANI

Despite coming from a prominent family, Jamila Afghani began life facing many difficulties. She contracted polio and developed scoliosis as a child. At the age of 14 she survived a shot to the head by Soviet troops.

Regardless, Jamila was able to overcome these challenges and dedicated her life to empowering women in Afghanistan, establishing the Noor Educational Center (NEC) in Kabul. Realizing the powerful influence of religious leaders, or *Imams*, in Afghan society, Jamila collaborated with the Women's Islamic Initiative in Spirituality and Equality (WISE), a program of the American Society for Muslim Advancement, to start an Imam gender-sensitive training program at the NEC. The program is geared towards educating Imams on women's rights through an Islamic and human rights framework. Through Friday sermons and widespread media, 9.5 million people in Afghanistan have been exposed to the Imams' sermons on women's rights.

Impressed by her work through the NEC, WISE invited Jamila to join the WISE network and to participate in WISE's second annual conference in July 2009 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Inspired by a case study at the conference highlighting an Imam training program in the Philippines, Jamila submitted a proposal for a similar project in Afghanistan.

The project would be a six month gender-sensitive training program that included printing 10,000 copies of booklets in Dari on Afghan women's rights in the following five areas: education, marriage, inheritance, ownership and property and political and social participation. Twenty university students would be hired as part of the project to monitor Friday sermons delivered at the mosques. A mix of 20 moderate and conservative Imams were invited to participate in the project, including two Shi'ite Imams.

Jamila faced significant challenges throughout the project. She faced criticism from some Imams who expressed that the program was too "Western". The training sessions showcased that numerous harmful traditional practices against women were a result of patriarchal (mis)interpretations of the Quran and *Hadith* (sayings of Prophet Muhammad). In supporting women's human rights, the sessions utilized the Afghan constitution, other national and international legal treaties and the WISE Compact, which encapsulates the WISE mission and defends gender equality through the objectives of Islamic law. Jamila later won over the doubting Imams after deciding to conduct sessions in smaller workgroups with a balance of moderate and conservative Imams and fostering extensive discussions.

Jamila also faced difficulty after monitoring reports indicated that initial reception to Imams' sermons was stagnant. Jamila and her team had the student monitors spark the discussion by asking questions themselves and within a month and a half many more congregants became engaged with the topics.

At one of the Friday sermons a project monitor noticed an elderly man at the back of the prayer hall who looked troubled. The monitor asked the man if he needed any help, to which the man replied, *“No one can help me. Now time is gone and I have committed all sorts of violence against my daughters. I have received walwar [bride price], I stopped them from getting an education, I forced their marriages. They are suffering every day because of my wrongs. Why were these Imams not talking on these issues before?”*

Over the course of the project some 300 sermons on women’s rights were delivered by 20 Imams in different locations throughout the capital. Jamila and the NEC team will continue their work in the 20 participating mosques in Kabul and expand the project into 10 mosques in Jalalabad. The project will establish women’s sections in ten mosques in Kabul to empower women in raising their voices on the issue of their own rights.

After being nominated by WISE, Jamila won the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding’s 2010 *Peacemakers in Action* award, which honors individuals inspired by their faith to work on peace initiatives in regions of armed conflict. In addition, WISE’s collaboration with Jamila and the NEC was recognized by the Clinton Global Initiative as a [2010 Commitment to Action](#). CGI members showcase Commitments, or initiatives to address various global challenges, in order to spark constructive feedback and garner partnerships.