

TODAY'S ZAMAN



WISE Muslim women shatter stereotypes at İstanbul conference

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More than 180 Muslim women from 45 countries attended panels and seminars in İstanbul last week focusing on educating and empowering Muslim women and promoting their rights from an Islamic perspective.

“There are 750 million Muslim women in the world, and there is no single institution that speaks for us,” said Daisy Khan, executive director of the American Society for Muslim Advancement (ASMA). She said that’s why this conference was organized to bring together powerful Muslim women who are making changes in their communities while working in different professions. “We set up a Muslim women’s Shura council, which issues religious statements on abuses against women,” she said. “We don’t issue fatwas, since we don’t have the legal authority to do so, but we issue scholarly significant statements, and they have a lot of weight.”

Last month, the Shura council issued a statement against female genital mutilation (FGM). Adriana Kaplan, renowned for her work against FGM, told Khan that the statement they issued was very effective in Gambia, and that a large group of imams,

scholars and jurists who had come to an African conference looked at the statement and found it convincing.

“They actually issued a fatwa against female genital mutilation,” Khan said. “This is the effect of a group of people coming together, looking at a women’s issue, addressing it through a religious lens and saying this is not Islam, but a horrendous cultural practice that is harming women, and harming the image of Islam at the same time. We have to stop it.”

On Oct. 14-17, ASMA hosted the Women’s Islamic Initiative on Spirituality and Equality (WISE) conference, “Muslim Women Leaders: At the Frontlines of Change,”

in İstanbul, where the focus was on leadership. The conference included female political activists who ignited the Arab Spring, and leaders of non-violent activism in Syria. One of those women was Laila Bugaighis, consultant obstetrician and gynecologist, and a senior lecturer at Benghazi Medical School. She currently chairs the National Protection Against Violence Committee (NPAVC) working under the Libyan Ministry of Health, which is now under the control of Libya’s ruling National Transitional Council (NTC) since the fall of former leader Muammar Gaddafi.

“We started working with Doctors Without Borders in March. They were the people who came first to help us. In Libya we did not have any civil society before,” Bugaighis said. She said that female survivors of rape had to go to police in order to get a certificate in order to be medically examined. “After examining her, we would send her back to the police. If she got pregnant, we could not offer an abortion. We are everything about this practice,” she said. “Now [a rape victim] can come directly to us and we will protect her confidentiality. We can help her to have a safe abortion. Before, most [rape] survivors would never come and talk about being raped.”

She acknowledged that everything is new and in transition in Libya. “We are just at the beginning. We need to change some laws and amend some laws. But we are working on it. We are getting help from international organizations. Hopefully, we will do it right,” she said adding that even though her work is under a government agency, they are working with international partners and newly established non-governmental organizations in Libya.

About the role of women in the Libyan revolution, she said that they were there with the men. “We want to be treated equally. We respect men; they are half of the society but we’re the other half. In Islamic societies, women are always pushed behind. In Libya, education is free for all. We have hundreds of educated women -- academics, doctors, judges, lawyers,” she said.

As the Muslim world is increasingly populated with women’s rights activists, they seem to challenge patriarchal cultures, tribal customs and oppressive governments. They believe that Muslim women should not be barred from any kind of leadership. “If they seek it and want it, it will be justified Quranically, and it will be justified in regards to

Islamic tradition,” Khan said, and added that the Shura Council is going to issue a statement on the issue soon.

“Islam empowers women. I’ve learned that gender equality is an intrinsic part of my religious community and my faith. I want to share this with others. Otherwise, we can come to believe that the religion is the problem, while in fact religion can offer solutions,” she also said.

ASMA is also involved in religious education, for example, they are working with imams in Afghanistan. “We are saying that women have a right to education, divorce, etc. These are not just human rights, these are Islamic rights too. And we convince them. A lot of people in our community believe that argument more readily than the human rights argument. What we are trying to do is to bring the two arguments together,” she said.

Raised in Kashmir and an architect by profession, Khan now lives in the US, “In the secular West,” as she puts it. She is married to Egyptian-born Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, who is the founder of the Cordoba Initiative, an independent, multi-faith and multi-national project working with state and non-state actors to improve relations between the Muslim and Western worlds. WISE is also a program of the Cordoba Initiative. The first WISE conference was launched in New York in 2006, and the second conference was held in the Malay city of Kuala Lumpur in 2009.

‘Turkey can have an impact on Muslim communities’

The American Society for Muslim Advancement’s (ASMA) Daisy Khan indicated that Turkey is already having a significant impact through its leadership in the Muslim world, and that it can do more.

“[Turkey] has a rich history of pluralism. If it shares that with the world, it can have an impact on how we reshape our world. Turkey presents a model for how you can be both secular and Muslim. All Muslim societies are reshaping themselves. Malaysia and Indonesia are good models too. We have to see if [those models] work in other societies,” she said.

Turkey is also important for Laila Bugaighis, a physician who is taking a leadership role on issues related to women in Libya following the collapse of Muammar Gaddafi’s 42-year totalitarian rule. “[Turkey] represents the modern Islamic nation. It represents a good example of secularism. In Libya, we want to be moderate. We do not want to be pulled into extremism. We want democracy, equality and justice. We don’t want corruption. There were a lot of Turkish companies working in Libya before the revolution. We want to continue to cooperate. Now Turkey supports us; we have the Turkish flag along with the flags of other nations that helped us,” she said, but added that Libyans were dismayed because the Turkish government did not initially speak out against Gaddafi.

At the Women’s Islamic Initiative in Spirituality and Equality (WISE) conference in Istanbul, there was a special Turkish panel, “A Woman’s Place in Islam – Views from

Turkish Women,” with Cemalnur Sargut, a prominent Turkish spiritual leader. Some outside observers of the conference have voiced their criticisms that there should have been more Turkish Muslim women represented at the conference. Turkish participants of the conference included Esin Çelebi, a female descendant of the revered Turkish Sufi figure Mevlana Jelaluddin Rumi, Beyza Zapsu, wife of the former aide to Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan Cüneyd Zapsu, Ayşenur Bilgi Solak, the deputy head of the İstanbul branch of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AK Party), and Zeynep Banu Dalaman, Aydın University’s Women’s Studies Coordinator.

Sargut, the İstanbul branch head of the Turkish Women’s Association (TÜRKKAD), which partnered with ASMA for the conference in İstanbul, said that since the conference participation required fees, they opened it to the public via a live Internet broadcast of the whole conference. At the conference, she stressed that people need to be educated about how Islam values women. “We should remember the example of Hz. Kahdija, who worked throughout her life, and was supported in this by her husband, the Prophet,” she said, and added that often local traditions are more influential than Islam itself in creating obstacles for women.

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