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Dr. Suad Joseph
General Editor

Distinguished Professor of Anthropology and Women and Gender Studies, University of
California, Davis

<http://sjoseph.ucdavis.edu/ewic>

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“Family, Law and Politics”

By Mohamed Nimer

Methodical research on the social and political conditions of American Muslim women is almost non-existent. There is little reliable information that would allow observers to draw an accurate portrait of the facts and perceptions of the involvement of women in communal and public life. However, the pool of Muslim women in the American public sphere is growing, as they are increasingly joining the ranks of upper middle-class professionals and community activists.

There are a few Muslim women leaders who have run for public office, such as Representative Yaphett El-Amin, a democrat who represents the 57th district in the Missouri House. She worked as a counselor to young men in trouble before she became the first ward Democratic committeewoman in 1997. She is public about her faith and receives support from her husband in her involvement in politics. She has established her political career through the Democratic Party apparatus. However, little is known about her involvement in Muslim women's issues.

Muslim leaders, women included, have engaged in the polemical discourse on the status of contemporary Muslim women. This activism represents the hallmark of such groups as the Muslim Women's League, which is headed by a Los Angeles pediatrician, and Muslim Women Lawyers for Human Rights, which is headed by a law professor in Richmond, Virginia. These groups and others profess interest in reclaiming the status of women as free, equal, and vital contributors to society. As they implement educational programs designed to achieve this objective, they stand in sharp contrast to the stereotypical images of Muslim women as an oppressed, helpless segment of the Muslim community.

There is also the International League of Muslim Women, an organ affiliated with the W. D. Mohammed Ministry, founded by the mainline African American Muslim leader. This women's group was established in 1984 and now has 33 chapters, 3 of which are located in the West African countries of Togo and Ghana. To many Muslims, these Muslim women stand as a good example of how American citizens in the age of globalism see the whole world as a natural domain for Islamic sisterhood and for cultural and religious connectivity.

A new trend in Muslim women's activism focuses on the human experience of women rather than the politically charged dialogue on the status of Muslim women. A number of groups have begun to identify areas of need by women that do not offend the sensibilities of the various sides of the ideological debate. Some have organized to provide services to women, beginning predictably in the area of education.

American Muslim organizations continue to struggle to define the role of women in public life. Although there are no religious objections to this type of involvement, men are less interested in such prospects than women. In Muslim community forums, these women have begun to make the case for inclusion. *Azizah*, a magazine founded by two women in 2001, which accepts contributions only from women, works to encourage Muslim women to

forge their own identity in community and public arenas. The founders of the magazine have decided that it is essential to include the various experiences of women, whether they are immigrant or indigenous, wear the ḥijāb or not, and whether they choose to pursue careers outside the house or are satisfied with their roles as mothers and homemakers. As a result, the magazine's articles cover a range of topics, including fashion, ethnic cuisines, the opportunities and challenges facing women in the workplace, marriage, and the role of women in their communities.

Muslim households in the United States usually lack the extended family support system that is strong in Muslim countries. Community is the family's secure bridge to the outside world. Similar to trends in Christian and Jewish congregations, Muslim places of worship represent hubs of activity for women, who usually form auxiliary committees running programs for mosque participants. They also teach children the value of volunteerism and supporting their mosque through a variety of fund-raising activities, including bake sales. Women usually take on these tasks merely as members of the community doing their part to meet their collective needs. Additionally, women's committees at mosques organize speaking events and discussion groups focusing on women's concerns.

Islamic centers with adequate facilities have offered women's fitness programs. Others have arranged for all-female sports events, including swimming, in outside facilities. In most mosques women are usually allowed to serve on the board of directors, although this actually occurs in only a small number of congregations. In 2001, Cherrefe Kadri, a resourceful lawyer, became a chairperson for the Islamic Center of Greater Toledo in Perrysburg, Ohio. She has taught and served as a director of the center's weekend school, organized youth summer programs, edited the center's bimonthly magazine, and served as secretary and vice president of the society's executive committee.

Women staff several other community organizations. Islamic schools in particular provide several thousand jobs, which are largely occupied by women who teach and perform administrative functions. Women also work as reporters in community media outlets and spokespersons in a number of public affairs agencies. Indeed, groups like the Council on American-Islamic Relations, which is heavily staffed by women, often measure progress in the status of Muslim civil rights in the United States by improvements in the treatment of Muslim women.

National community development groups have increasingly recognized the importance of women's involvement in community life. Some have opted for organizational structures for women parallel to those led by men. An example of such a tendency is the Sister's Wing of the Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA), which was established in 1979. Its website notes that the women's department was developed "to enable ourselves, the sisters, to work on the establishment of the Deen [faith] freely and within our own circle." The group's heightened recognition of the social problems that face the community has led it to establish Muslim Family Services, an agency that aims to help families become self-sufficient. According to the organization, the divorce rate among American Muslim couples is intolerably high and represents a serious threat to Muslim family life. The group has supported the construction of women's shelters and initiated a matchmaking program.

In addition to the faith-based organizations, there are several women's groups that identify themselves with a certain ancestry; few of these groups, which are mainly Palestinian and Lebanese, have organized for the sake of gender and ethnic awareness. For example, the Palestinian-American Women's Association has worked to highlight the suffering of Palestinian women under Israeli occupation. There is also the Lebanese Women's Awakening in North America, a feminist discussion forum on the web. But ethnic women's groups tend also to be social service oriented, offering programs directed at beneficiaries in their local areas.

In regions with a significant Muslim population, social service centers have paid special attention to issues affecting the lives of women, such as domestic abuse. In Wood Dale, Illinois, the Hamdard Center for Health and Human Services has provided medical and counseling services since 1994. The center's crisis hotline is staffed by multilingual workers who are able to communicate with recent immigrants from the Middle East and South Asia. The center's shelter assists women and child victims of domestic abuse. Hamdard also provides court-ordered

assessments in divorce and child-abuse cases, and serves as a facilitator for publicly funded social service programs. When the agency started, it was completely dependent on community support. While the demand for services grew over time, donations lagged. The agency continued to grow, but it has become increasingly dependent on public funding.

Muslim women's organizations have clearly contributed to the welfare of women and society. These groups have offered replicable models for Muslim women's involvement outside family circles. Departing from earlier periods in the development of Muslim communities, when the discussion of women's issues was only a matter of intellectual interest, Muslim women's groups are paying more attention to the practical needs of women and their families and communities. This pragmatic tendency is taking hold not only in shaping internal community communications, but also in defining women's needs and the ways to mobilize resources to meet them.

Mohamed Nimer