

issue brief

Women's Leadership in the Muslim World



This CAFAmerica Issue Brief presents a synopsis of facts, research, and funding opportunities for causes you care about. It isn't meant to be a comprehensive report, and for that reason, provides a list of resources and websites where you can learn more.

We hope you will use this as a starting point to investigate your funding interests and find out how you can make a global difference.

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BACKGROUND

A young Pakistani woman, given access to an education, excelled in school, travelled the world, and, at age 35, became the first female prime minister of her country. Tragically, Benazir Bhutto, the first elected woman leader of a Muslim country, was assassinated in Pakistan on December 27, 2007. However, unlike most of her countrywomen, Bhutto was able to influence Pakistani culture and politics during her too short life.

Women everywhere are likely to suffer from some form of gender discrimination. The greatest inequities, however, exist in the Muslim world, notably in the Gulf States (Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates [UAE]). The United Nation's Development Programme's 2005 Arab Human Development Report noted that "stereotypical gender roles are deeply entrenched [in this region], limiting women's employment and decision-making opportunities, which are still the lowest in the world."

In the Muslim world, women are underrepresented in politics and the judiciary as well as in both public and private sector jobs. Personal status laws give them little voice in proceedings related to marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance. Domestic violence is prevalent and difficult to prosecute; clinics offering support to victims of sexual violence are rare, if not nonexistent, in certain countries.

Of 16 Middle East and North Africa countries, ten have signed and nine have ratified the Convention on All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Unfortunately, this does not guarantee women political and social freedoms. Even when reforms to increase women's rights are enacted, social norms may prevent their acceptance. In addition, many governments willing to embrace the "rhetoric of women's rights" stop short of actually implementing changes¹. The most recent Arab Human Development Report concluded that gender inequality remains one of the greatest challenges to human development in the Arab world².

SUCCESSES

Many Muslim women today face the same barriers to female empowerment that existed a century ago: little access to education, domestic violence, and few or no legal rights. However, in the past five years, due in large part to women's increasing activism and participation in all sectors of public life, this picture is changing:

- Progress in Gulf States like Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, traditionally more conservative than other countries, has been "driven in large part by the strong grassroots efforts of women's rights activists, lawyers, and journalists³." In 2005, Kuwaiti women won the right to vote. The first female judges were appointed in Bahrain and the UAE in 2006 and 2008, respectively.

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- Muslim women are turning to new, feminized interpretations of the Koran in their fight for gender equality. A recent conference in Malaysia brought together Muslim women from 47 countries to strategize on how to use Islamic tenets to their advantage in the courtroom. In the past few years, women-friendly Islamic arguments have been successfully used to change family laws in Morocco and Tunisia.
- The education gap is closing slowly in the Muslim world. Progress includes growing female enrollment in colleges, and increasing primary school completion rates. In several countries, girls are pursuing the humanities and sciences at greater rates than boys. In Qatar and the UAE, women outnumber their male peers 3 to 1, representing the “highest female-to-male university enrollment ratio worldwide⁴.”

LEADERSHIP

Muslim women are making inexorable progress towards greater gender equality. Benazir Bhutto was one among many Muslim female leaders working to inspire and empower other Muslim women.

In 2009, **Nora bint Abdullah al-Fayez** was appointed the first female Saudi Arabian minister. A U.S.-educated former teacher, Abdullah al-Fayez became Deputy Education Minister as part of a reshuffling by the Saudi King to rid his cabinet of ultra conservatives. Although the scope of her power remains to be seen, her appointment is especially significant in a country where women still lack the right to drive.

Rima Khoreibi is inspiring her fellow Muslims in an unconventional way. The Lebanese born Khoreibi has chosen the medium of comic books to spread the peaceful messages of Islam via its first female heroine - Iman. Raised in Saudi Arabia and Canada, Khoreibi is currently based in Dubai where she works on the “Adventures of Iman” and advocates for women’s rights. She donates a percentage of proceeds from the sale of her books to charity.

Saadia Belmir is succeeding in a domain notably closed to women, the judiciary. A Moroccan teacher and lawyer,

Belmir became a High Court Judge in Rabat, a Supreme Court justice, and an advisor to the Moroccan Minister of Justice. In 2005, Belmir was the first woman from an Arab country to be appointed to the United Nations Committee against Torture.

Malaysian feminist **Zainah Anwar** has been fighting for women’s rights for two decades, mainly through Sisters in Islam (SIS). SIS is a research and advocacy group that seeks to counterbalance Malaysia’s conservative Islamic government through women-friendly interpretations of the Koran. Although Anwar is no longer head of SIS, she remains committed to reversing unjust traditions in Malaysia, like polygamy, and domestic and sexual violence within marriage.

Nujood Mohammed Ali has sadly gained international attention as Yemen’s first child bride to legally obtain a divorce. One of sixteen children, Nujood was nine years old when her father arranged her marriage to a man three times her age. After enduring repeated beatings and rapes within her forced marriage, she made her way alone to a local courthouse to demand a divorce. Human rights lawyer **Shada Nasser** successfully argued the case pro bono. Today, Nujood is back with her family and in school thanks to the aid of private donors. Since her divorce, several other Yemenite child brides have filed similar cases.

SUPPORT MUSLIM WOMEN WITH CAFAMERICA

One Woman Initiative, United States

One woman can achieve great things. With this credo in mind and influenced by the legacy of Benazir Bhutto, the One Woman Initiative launched in May 2008. Under the leadership of Chair Carly Fiorina and a group of private sector co-chairs and with the support of the U.S. State Department and USAID, this joint public-private initiative was conceived to foster peace and prosperity in the Muslim world. On May 12, 2008, coinciding with Mother’s Day, then Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice introduced the OWI: “We recognized the impact that one moderate woman had in a major Muslim country, and it inspired us to help nurture others who could become forces for moderation and peaceful change.”

4. <http://freedomhouse.org>



Convinced that a single empowered woman can impact families and communities and that many empowered women can impact entire nations and regions, OWI's founders set a precise and achievable goal. Through private funds raised by the organization chairs, corporate contributions, and in coordination with the USAID, OWI will spend \$100 million over the next 5 years to "empower women to achieve a local difference and a global impact."

In the organization's first year of operations, five grantees have already benefited from OWI aid. The selected grassroots organizations are the Kashf Foundation (Pakistan), Group for Urban and Rural Development (GUARD-India), the Egyptian Association for Human and Environmental Development (EAHED – Egypt), the Magbassa Kita Foundation, Inc. (Philippines), and the Women's Bar Association (Azerbaijan). CAFAmerica is managing OWI funds raised from individual and corporations. Learn more about the One Woman Initiative at www.onewomaninitiative.org.

Women's Bar Association, Azerbaijan

As in many predominantly Muslim countries, Azeri women are largely excluded from the legal profession; among the Newly Independent States, Azerbaijan rates near the bottom in number of female legal professionals. The Azeri Women's Bar Association (WBA) and its team of over 250 women are working hard to close this gap and steadily improve the status of women in Azerbaijan through a comprehensive approach to gender issues. Their immediate goals include increasing the professional status of female lawyers, educating Azeri women about their rights, and promoting solidarity among women.

Launched with support from USAID and the American Bar Association (ABA) in 2007, the WBA's membership has tripled since its creation. This year WBA was one of three organizations to receive a One Woman Initiative grant. OWI Chair Carly Fiorina praised the WBA for work which, "focused on women's issues training, community leadership, and access to legal advice, [and] will empower

women in your region to make an individual difference with an ever expanding impact."

The WBA is the first and only women's bar association in Central Asia. Although the WBA's website www.wba-az.org is currently only available in Azerbaijani, you can learn more about them, and the One Woman Initiative, at www.cafamerica.org.

Magbassa Kita Foundation, Inc. (Philippines)

A Filipino senator launched the Magbassa Kita Foundation (MKFI) as a literacy project in the 1960s. To address the country's growing challenges, MKFI gradually expanded its mission to include "livelihood skills training, capability building among farmers, development of self-help organizations, and cooperatives and producing post-literacy material" (a leap from their initial adult education programs). In 2001, when organizers witnessed the violence and resulting instability in the southern Philippines, the group's priorities expanded once again, this time to offer local women training as peace advocates and agents of change through their Peace Advocacy Program.

Other MKFI programs include micro credit projects for Muslim women, a radio program called "Women Talk Peace," and local partnerships to monitor local elections. MKFI's efforts have attracted international attention, including collaboration with the U.S. Embassy of the Philippines as well as the One Women Initiative. In recognition of their approach to 'empower women as peace advocates and to increase their acceptance as conflict mediators in a largely male-dominated culture,' MKFI has been selected as an OWI grantee and is already a part of CAFAmerica's database. To learn more about MKFI and how they are helping women in the Philippines, visit them at www.mkfi.org.ph.

To give to the organizations listed here, or another international charity of your choice, visit CAFAmerica today at www.cafamerica.org.

RESOURCES

Reports and Publications

Who Answers to Women? Gender and Accountability: Progress of the World's Women 2008/2009. United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), September 2008. Offers an indicator of the progress made towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to achieve gender equality and female empowerment. This latest volume in the UNIFEM publication indicates that despite mixed progress, additional accountability systems are needed to ensure that the MDGs are met by the 2015 deadline. To download this report, visit <http://www.unifem.org/progress/2008/>.

Campaigning Against Fear: Women's Participation in Afghanistan's 2005 Elections. Human Rights Watch, August 17, 2005. This in-depth report reveals the gruelling and frightening challenges faced by female candidates in the 2005 Afghanistan elections. Based on interviews with the candidates, election workers, and local NGOs, the report draws an interesting portrait of Muslim women daring participation in local politics despite the risks involved. To read the full report, visit <http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2005/08/17/campaigning-against-fear-women-s-participation-afghanistan-s-2005-elections>.

Websites

Centre of Arab Women for Training and Research, www.cawtar.org

Center for Women's Global Leadership, www.cwgl.rutgers.edu

Middle East Forum, www.meforum.org

Middle East Review of International Affairs (MERIA), <http://meria.idc.ac.il/>

Muslim Women's League, www.mwlnusa.org

United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), www.unifem.org

United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW), www.un-instraw.org

Women's Democracy Network, www.wdn.org

Women Watch, www.un.org/womenwatch

Women for Women International, www.womenforwomen.org

To learn more about women's rights, download our issue brief *Empowering Women* at http://www.cafamerica.org/dnn/Portals/0/charitydocs/IssueBrief_Empowering_Women.pdf.

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Join us in our commitment to make lasting change. Call us today for a free brochure, *Your Passport to Global Giving*, or visit us at www.cafamerica.org.

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