

# The Dallas Morning News

cas' Leading Newspaper

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Dallas, Texas, Sunday, August 4, 1996

38 Sections HF

## Muslim women work to alter stereotypes

### Groups, magazine tout tolerance and diversity of Islam in America

By Deborah Kovach Caldwell  
Staff Writer of The Dallas Morning News

American Muslim women are on the threshold of an image change. It can't come soon enough for Roshan Selod.

She rolls her eyes as she recalls job interviews after graduating last year with top honors from Southern Methodist University's law school. "They asked weird questions like, 'Does your husband let you

work?' I get so offended by that," says Mrs. Selod, 25. "People don't mean to be offensive, but they have negative ideas about what Muslim women — and men — are like."

Mrs. Selod — born on the East Coast, a cheerleader in high school and now a corporate lawyer — is trying to blend a tradition-bound faith with modern-day aspirations. Like thousands of others, she is building a way of life that works for

her in America.

Increasingly, Muslim women are forming national groups to provide them with a platform and an organized voice. They're posting home pages on the Internet and writing papers and booklets. Last week, a glossy magazine for American Muslim women made its debut.

They're teaching Islamic women's studies at universities, starting Please see AMERICAN on Page 28A.

## American Muslim women altering stereotypes of Islam

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horrified women's staffers and opening a home for elderly Muslim women in Dallas, one woman built a profession in order that brought together some of the country's top Muslim female doctors.

She is discussing how to put away layers of a mainstreamed curriculum that they believe has undervalued women in the same of Islam.

"I've always thought of my religious faith as a spiritual anchor, but now I see it as a source that gives me strength and courage to do what I need to do to make a difference in the world," she says.

### A love of Islam

These are not religious activities taking a page from the playbook of social women's movements. All of them provide a love of Islam. They are intertwined in making their religious traditions.

After any day they respect their conservative sisters who follow the traditional Muslim way. These women believe that such practices as covering their hair and bodies and refraining from cosmetics with the opposite sex are core tenets of the faith.

Mrs. Selod appreciates the more conservative point of view. However, "I've had to take your surroundings into account when you practice your faith," she says, dressed in a long-sleeved top, her hair covered with pink hijabs and eyes lowered with modesty. "You don't have to do anything in technical compliance. The question is 'What is your intent?'"

Mrs. Selod's parents, a Pakistani immigrant father and an American Catholic mother, divorced when she was 10. She is a Muslim but her father, she didn't date in high school.

But her father let her play lacrosse and volleyball. She was even a cheerleader. "That took a little more tolerance," she said. "I got up with it."

In a world of compromise, Mrs. Selod believes that her father's tolerance is the key to her success. For example, in keeping with Muslim beliefs, she doesn't drink alcohol as her law firm's weekly happy hours, where they drink beer and long shots and wine in the dining hall every month.

By the early twenties of Islam, women were writers, artists, rulers, active scientists and business women. But the rights established in the Koran ended in practice because of patriarchal cultures, she says.

Islam. An average woman is to cover part of the face of her face. That is their society, and they're not going anywhere," said Sheikh Alkhatib, vice president and founder of the North American Council for Muslim Women, a professional women's group organized four years ago.

"The kind of education among Muslim women has lagged behind mainstream education," said Mrs. Alkhatib, 38, who lives in suburban Washington, D.C.

Married 17 years and with three grown children, Mrs. Alkhatib struggled for an equal partnership with her husband, an Iraq immigrant, but he didn't know how to do with his American-born wife.

"I look about five years for my husband to have a conversion of more than five sisters with me," she said. "When he comes over, don't talk to their wives."

They worked things out, and Mrs. Alkhatib became an activist. "Take the women social studies course about the Middle East, it is a great course. Get some cable television show on Middle Eastern parenting and teaching English-as-a-second-language classes."

She believes her situation flows from the teachings of the prophet Muhammad. "He was the first world leader who was a promoter of women's rights," Mrs. Alkhatib said.

Muslim women say that when their faith was founded in seventh-century Arabia, female independence was mother Islam's first gift to women. It was the right to live with a partner, to have equal rights with men, to own property, to have the right to inherit property, the right to consent to marriage, the right to divorce and the right to work.

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Dr. Shakila Ahmed, a radiologist at the Dallas Veterans Affairs Hospital, is among a movement of Muslim women who are trying to rebuild their image in the United States.

Cultural changes  
The example of women everywhere. Mohammed directed women to join men in the mosque, but today most women in Islamic countries don't do so. However, the practice has been revived in this century.

"The reason many people who haven't delved into Islam believe that Islam is a tool for suppression of women is because they're looking at the later writings of people who happen to be Muslim, or the later practice of people who happen to be Muslim," Mrs. Alkhatib said. "It's a large part of what we're about to re-educating Muslim women and the public."

Mrs. Alkhatib covers her hair with a scarf because she believes that the Koran directs it. But not everyone in her group agrees, and she doesn't demand it.

"I've got a cousin if you have faith in hijab," she said. "I've got a cousin if you have faith in hijab," she said. "I've got a cousin if you have faith in hijab," she said.

She estimated that in the United States about a third of Muslim women are situated about their rights and capabilities about practicing Islam. Another third may have a bit about the Koran, but they don't do much about it. The rest, she said, "would support actual practices."

### Putting family first

Mrs. Alkhatib doesn't see her life as restrictive after all. Instead, she has always been an educated professional woman. She has a master's degree in the same time balancing motherly and professional responsibilities.

"In Islam, there is nothing called a woman," she said. "I think about women who call themselves feminists, but I think a lot of female in their lives."

There are no limits of education that delight Riyadh Taylor, editor of a new magazine called "Muslim: The Magazine of Culture" among Muslim women. The first issue, published in Seattle, came out last week.

"It's a vehicle of communication between Muslim women," she said. "It's for a woman when it comes to being accepted in the media."

Taylor, a native living for Mr. Taylor, a native of Trinidad, first grew up in Toronto. The first time she encountered their magazine as a teenager, she was struck by the way it was so different from anything she had ever seen. It was a magazine that was so different from anything she had ever seen.

Each issue of "Muslim" will include features on health, law, health and finance, faith, money, profile of Muslim women, style, gardening, children, food and book reviews, she said. "A lot of Muslim women don't know about their rights because a lot of culture has been mixed in with religion," Mrs. Taylor said.

"We're not trying to propagate an American agenda," she said. "We're trying to propagate Islam and the community we have. It's about understanding and knowing the rights Islam gives you."

These rights were what attracted Mrs. Taylor to Islam when she was a teenager studying world religions. Her parents, both Christian, divorced her by divorce, but in the mosque for Islam, she said.

Practically she married an African American who was a Muslim, with whom she had five children. They are now divorced.

Mrs. Taylor believes strongly in the rights of the faith. She covers her hair with a scarf, prays five times a day, fasts twice weekly and during Ramadan, and has made three pilgrimages to Mecca. But she doesn't believe in the same things that she has seen in the media. "I've been able to do some things better than some people. I've chosen to do something I wanted to do."

### Interpretation

Dr. Shakila Ahmed, a radiologist who works at the Dallas Veterans Affairs medical hospital, interprets Islam in much the same way as Mrs. Taylor. During Ramadan, she stops back to read the Koran, and every day she asks her secretary to hold her chair for 10 minutes while she prays on a mat laid out on the floor. She wears long-sleeved or long pants in the office, and she has been to Mecca three times. But she shares her faith with male patients and doesn't cover her hair.

"It's the interpretation that makes the difference," said Dr. Ahmed. "Some say 'I'm covering my head covering the head and chest. Some say it means covering the head. It's just the way you interpret the Arabic language.'"

Dr. Ahmed, who immigrated to the United States from India 10 years ago, raised two children while working full time.

"Islam doesn't teach you to do several and do nothing," she said. "Dr. Ahmed and her husband, Dr. Bednar Ahmed, a First World physician and founder of the Muslim Community Center for Women Services in Arlington, has always treated her as an equal."

While she valued recently in the past with a great, but husband had prepared a tray of water and cookies in the kitchen. She later said she'd thought about the role of women, particularly because she was so much religiously married and got around women in her practice — that vast majority of them non-Muslims.

"I'm not those kind of being in Islam or being Christian," she said. "I'm not an old girl and that's not an option. I'm not a woman, I'm a woman."

The Ahmeds met at their first marriage in a new country with two small children and two new careers. Their parents came each year from India for long visits, but Dr. Ahmed had the support of both a husband and extended family.

But she attributed much of her success to being smart and tough. "I'm able to do anything as long as I'm smart," she said. "It's a matter of fact. I've been able to do some things better than some people. I've chosen to do something I wanted to do."

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