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In Their Own Words

A magazine for and by today's modern muslimah

By Muna Shikaki

"ONE child ... entered kindergarten believing that everyone had two mothers. When she found out otherwise, she was very puzzled and 'felt sorry that others weren't as lucky' as she."

Perhaps this is the beginning of an article on the effects of lesbian marriage on children? Maybe an article on moms and step-moms?

Guess again. The paragraph actually comes straight out of an article that appeared in this winter's edition of *Azizah*, the English-language magazine for Muslim women. And the article is not about same-sex marriage in the Muslim community. It's actually about the effects of men having multiple wives—polygyny—on their children.

Not a debate you're likely to find in mainstream American publications. And if you do, chances are it's the token article critical about the plight of women in Taliban-era Afghanistan or present-day Saudi Arabia. That's why Tayyibah Taylor, 50, a Canadian of Caribbean descent who converted to Islam when she was 19, decided to launch *Azizah*, a quarterly published since 2001, in Atlanta, Georgia. All of *Azizah's* writers are female and Muslim.

The magazine comes at a time when coverage of Islam, the world's fastest growing religion, is tainted by ignorance, prejudice and stereotypes. But, *Azizah*, a magazine for Muslim women, lets Muslim women speak for themselves. It remains to be seen, however, if *Azizah* will survive in the competitive and costly magazine world.

"For the first time, Muslim women are seeing themselves reflected positively in the media," said Taylor, the publisher and editor in chief. "We celebrate Islam, but we don't hide all the blemishes of Muslims."

There is no shortage of beautiful women in *Azizah*, and Taylor is one of them. She's been described as "a gorgeous woman in a silky headwrap" by Newsweek and has had her share of media attention. Taylor, who is pictured wearing vibrantly colored, intricate tops and headscarves in the "Upfront" editor's letter section of the magazine, also happens to be nice—and down to earth. She usually answers the phone in the *Azizah* office herself.

Azizah (\$8.50) is very much a glossy women's magazine. It has articles on fashion, food, travel, books and relationships. Its 112 pages contain articles, photographs, and illustrations, and a quarter of its pages are devoted to ads. The magazine's "Well-Being" section covers topics like massage and aromatherapy; its "Destinations" section mentions places to pray throughout the world (including one on mosques in the U.S. Virgin Islands). Fashion sections have models wearing modest clothes, some with backdrops of the beach. A long garment that covers most of the body from the neck down, the *djilbab*, is modeled with a college backdrop ("This denim-look *djilbab* is perfect for the campus.") A "wrap and snap" black *djilbab* looks as if it could be put on in a second.

Yet the magazine also delves into serious topics such as AIDS in the Muslim community, birth control in Islam and polygyny. It includes headlines like "America's First Muslimah Judge" and "How Inclusive is the Muslim Community of the Disabled?" Taylor said that although these topics can be very controversial, it depends on the manner in which they are covered. "My goal is not controversy," she said. "It's rather to instigate discussion."

"In order to do [the topic of polygyny] justice, I had to take three steps back and come up with something fresh," she said. "So the way we decided to approach it was through children who have been raised in polygynous marriages." (Polygyny is different from polygamy, a term that describes a situation in which both genders have multiple spouses.) Instead of pitting supporters against opponents or alienating people with strong views on the matter, the magazine decided to publish firsthand accounts, both positive and negative, from people who grew up in polygynous households.

"It's a magazine for Muslim women who do not apologize for being Muslim," Tayyibah said. "For the Muslim woman who seeks to better herself spiritually and socially, a woman who has made Islam an integral part of her existence."

Though *Azizah* started out with a few hundred readers, it is now distributed in five countries, including the United States, the United Kingdom and Canada. Its print order is still low at 5,000 to 10,000 copies an issue but since many readers share their copies, Taylor estimates its readership at around 25,000.

In 2000, Taylor and Marlina Soerakoesoemah, 36, the creative director of the magazine, founded WOW publications, which owns *Azizah*. Taylor said WOW is a fluid acronym. "It stands for Women Of Wonder/Wit/Wisdom, whatever we feel like that day," she said with a laugh.

Azizah is not Taylor's first experience with a Muslim women's magazine. Ten years ago, she partnered with a Muslim publisher who liked the idea, and started Sisters!, a similar magazine. That experience, however, was short lived. Taylor said the publisher, Amica International, put a lot of restrictions on her.

"For example, the cover itself was always an illustration, and all of the women in the pictures had to be covered." When Taylor wanted to write a story about breast cancer, she said the publisher told her she could write an article on cancer but told her, "You can't mention 'breast.'" He said it was "too salacious." Four copies later, *Sisters!* was no longer.

Although all the women on the front page of *Azizah* cover their hair, many on the inside pages do not, reflecting the wide variation within the Muslim population. This decision stirred criticism from both sides.

A reader from Santa Rosa, California, wrote in the Summer 2001 issue: "I think you are promoting a bad image. The strongest opinion among all the major Islamic scholars ... is that the woman must cover her face. It seems to me that you are promoting a westernized version of Islam."

In another issue, a woman from Falls Church, Virginia, writes: "Every woman shown was covered. Though this is Islamically correct, it is not necessarily accurately representing the population of Muslim women living in America. ... By only portraying women who cover, you may make those who don't feel left out of the loop and hence not a desired part of your readership community."

Taylor said the reason she always shows women wearing a hair scarf is recognition. If the women on the front weren't covered, *Azizah* would look like a magazine for only Arab or Pakistani women (depending on the woman on any particular issue). Instead, "the scarf depicts her as a Muslim."

The women on the covers, though, are diverse. Unlike *Essence* or *Latina*, *Azizah* doesn't represent a certain ethnic group or race. Thus, some of the women on the cover look Middle Eastern; others are Pakistani and many are African-American. This diversity reflects the diversity among American Muslims. Rabiah Ahmad, the communications coordinator for the Council on American-Islamic Relations, said her organization estimates that of the six to seven million Muslims in the United States, 30 percent are Asian, 30 percent are African-American and 30 percent are Arab. Many are recent converts.

The name, *azizah*, represents this diversity. The word itself is Arabic for “dear to one’s heart,” but it’s also a woman’s name. “It is geographically non-specific; different ethnicities use it,” said Taylor. “In every Muslim community, you will find an *Azizah*.”

Though the magazine doesn’t posit itself as a controversial magazine, it is not complacent. Sometimes, the simple act of covering a topic can be seen as taking a stand. But some of the most important articles are not necessarily the most provocative ones.

“How Inclusive Is the Muslim Community of the Disabled?” questions the absence of ramps for wheelchairs in mosques. In the same issue, a disabled woman writes a heart-wrenching story about making the pilgrimage to Mecca in her wheelchair.

The article, and the magazine in general, reflects a “multiple critique,” a term championed by Miriam Cooke, professor of modern Arabic literature and culture at Duke University, for the way in which Islamic feminists critique Western culture and Islamic patriarchy without abandoning their religious identities.

“The ability [of Muslim women] to say, ‘I don’t like what the Saudis do’ doesn’t mean I can’t also say ‘I don’t like what Bush or a Muslim cleric is doing,’” Cooke said. “I can talk about all these various communities to which I belong.”

This blending works well when dealing with thorny issues such as birth control. Since neither contraception nor abortion are mentioned in Islam, there are diverging opinions on the question. This is, of course, a touchy subject, but *Azizah* tackles it.

The article (“A Guide to Contraceptive Choice”) presents different Muslim scholars’ positions on birth control, and goes on to say: “While most scholars agree that killing a live infant is not parallel to the precautionary measures that prevent the union of sperm and egg, some assert that birth control is an unnatural act and one that denies the bounty of Allah. ... Many scholars refute this last argument, stating that procreation is but one of the many functions of marriage.” The article also featured a sidebar on the scientific development of male contraception.

Articles on divorce, which is permitted but discouraged in Islam, don’t judge it; rather, they try to help women cope. Other articles discuss discrimination in the workplace, and offer financial-investment strategies.

One of *Azizah*’s permanent columns is called “Shahadah,” which means declaring oneself a Muslim. In each of the columns, a woman shares the story of how she discovered Islam and made it part of her life. The magazine deliberately refers to women by their first names. Taylor says there is a reason for this: “In Arabic, the last names are usually male.” So, instead of referring to a “Nadia Ahmad” as Ahmad, for example, she is referred to as Nadia. “It’s also more chatty and personable,” Taylor said.

The magazine’s strength is driven by its uncanny ability to tap unspoken concerns in the community—both social and spiritual. Taylor said the most provocative story was about Miriam, mother of Jesus. The writer, Palwasha Kakar, a student at the Harvard Divinity School, argued in her piece that Miriam meets the same criteria as male prophets. This spurred a lot of reader mail. “Some women thought it was blasphemous,” Taylor said. One said, “I’m tired of Muslim feminists.”

Kakar said the idea of her article “came in the context of a class on gender and poetry in Islam.” She said she wrote it after noticing that “a woman had to become more like a man in order to be considered a saint.” Kakar wanted to show how that was not always the case. She said that in addition to the negative feedback, she heard from a lot of Muslims asking why this topic had not been discussed earlier in Islam.

Taylor’s choice of important stories can be subtle as well. She points to a Spring 2002 article which showed how women have traditionally been passed over for leadership positions, as an example of a piece people might not consider important unless they were familiar with the nuances within the Muslim community.

While *Azizah* has to be credited for covering such topics in a sensitive manner, some of the articles are too superficial. The piece on polygyny starts with a promising and intriguing idea but ends up being a collection of quotes from the affected children. The article, by a writer who has been living in a polygynous household in the United States since she was 12, left readers with many unanswered questions.

How many of them exist? What is the extra legal framework for polygyny in the United States? What happens when the husband dies? Do the two women continue to live with each other? Who inherits the husband’s estate?

If the article is about the effect of polygyny on children, why aren’t any psychologists interviewed? Surely there must be a child psychologist in the Muslim world who has researched the subject. It’s a pity that such a subject be treated in such a shallow way.

However, many readers and writers alike are overjoyed about the magazine’s existence. The concept of reclaiming identity is what made Eisa Ulen, 35, one of *Azizah*’s contributors and a professor at Hunter College, want to write for the magazine. In one of her articles, Ulen wrote about Muslim women who work on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C. In another, she covered Muslims in the Girl Scouts. “I write for *Azizah* as a labor of love, like a form of worship, to [reaffirm] the lives of Muslim women in the public sphere,” she said.

She continued: “Immigrants and children are studying themselves in ways that they would not be able to in their countries. They couldn’t do it because of culture, not Islam.”

Though *Azizah* targets Muslim readers, Taylor said she wants mainstream advertising and distribution for this for-profit magazine. Currently, the ads are pretty much Muslim-specific: scarves and other Islamic dress, as well as caterers and restaurants. Taylor said she wants to bring in corporate advertising, adding, “I think they understand that Muslims, like all other Americans, use their products and they understand that we are a sizable population.” She said they are trying to get ads for “food products, automobiles, banks—things that every American uses and buys.”

Taylor said both circulation and advertising have steadily increased, though she was vague on the specifics. She said she expected to break even within a year or two.

“We are a member of IPA [the Independent Press Association], and they put us in touch with a distribution broker who said she would work on our behalf to place us on newsstands. I see that happening when our printing is done here in the United States,” she said. Currently, *Azizah* is printed in Indonesia, which, Taylor said, slows down the magazine’s delivery here.

Many kinks are still being worked out. One subscriber said she hadn’t received her copy of the magazine in a while. The New York distributor didn’t have copies of any issues on hand, requiring a special order from Atlanta to get the magazine. Even then, only three issues of the thirteen published so far were available.

Will *Azizah* become a successful niche publication? It is probably too early to tell. But the need for *Azizah*—and its timeliness—was never in question.