

Imam Training in Afghanistan <https://www.wisemuslimwomen.org/projects/afghanistan-imam-training/>

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A Report by the Women's Islamic Initiative in Spirituality and Equality

In order to address the promotion of women's rights in Afghanistan, WISE collaborated with the Noor Educational and Capacity Development Organization (NECDO), a non-governmental development organization dedicated to helping women and children in need. Jamila Afghani, NECDO's director, was inspired to create a project to train Imams—religious leaders—on women's rights after learning about a similar program in the Philippines during the 2009 WISE global conference. In Afghanistan, Imams are highly influential in shaping society and can be key allies in tackling gender inequality.

Because structural violence against women has become deeply woven into Afghan society, Jamila faced a difficult challenge in educating Imams about the relevance and importance of women's rights in Islamic teachings. However, Jamila and her team were able to successfully promote women's rights awareness through the Imam training program, which was implemented in two phases.

In November 2009, the program began as a six-month pilot project focused on training and mobilizing Imams from twenty influential and populous mosques. The Imams met regularly at NECDO to learn about patriarchal violence associated with marriage, inheritance, ownership and property, and political and social participation. Specific attention was given to the prevalence of violence, accurate related scriptural interpretations, national laws and instruments on women's rights, international human rights instruments on gender, and strategies for change. Imams were advised to use these themes to develop Friday sermons, which were monitored by university students.

Jamila faced significant challenges throughout the project, including criticism from some Imams who thought the program too "Western." The training sessions demonstrated that numerous harmful traditional practices against women were a result of patriarchal (mis)interpretations of the Quran and Hadith (sayings of Prophet Muhammad). In supporting women's human rights, the sessions utilized the Afghan constitution, other national and international legal treaties, and the WISE Compact, which encapsulates the WISE mission and defends gender equality through the objectives of Islamic law. Jamila later won over the doubting Imams after deciding to conduct sessions in smaller workgroups with a balance of moderate and conservative Imams and foster extensive discussions.

In phase one, twenty participating Imams delivered more than 300 sermons during the six-month project period to approximately 117,600 congregants, of which an estimated 12% were women. Media attention and coverage were extensive, with an estimated 9.5 million people being exposed to sermons on women's rights in Islam. The NECDO and the Imams also developed a series of booklets on the five women's human rights issues in simple Dari. 10,000 copies of the booklets were printed and distributed throughout the community.

In June 2010, supplemental funding was secured to extend the project for a year in the twenty mosques in Kabul and ten new mosques in Jalalabad. The project proposal objectives included hiring thirty university students—both male and female—to monitor the Imams’ Friday sermons, and publishing and distributing 15,000 copies of the booklets on women’s rights. The extended program also aimed to establish formal women’s sections in the ten participating mosques in Kabul and to appoint twenty women as leaders of these sections. Lastly, the program sought to expand women’s rights in Afghanistan by further developing the communication, presentation and networking skills of the Imams, university students, and women’s section leaders.

WISE agreed to establish and facilitate systems for the monitoring and evaluation of the project; disseminate information globally about the projects’ operations, outcomes, and replicability. NECDO agreed to implement the project as proposed, provide reports of monthly progress and consultant site visits, and solicit local media coverage of the projects’ successes.

OUR IMPACT

Both phase one and phase two exemplified the efficacy of mobilizing Imams for women’s rights in Afghanistan. In phase one, the program achieved the following results:

- Twenty Imams participated in the program: Twenty Imams from influential and populous mosques in Kabul met regularly at NEC to learn about five major women’s human rights issues (education, marriage, inheritance, ownership and property, and political and social participation) and related forms of violence.
- The twenty Imams developed and delivered over 300 Friday sermons on these five issues to approximately 117,600 congregants in total, of which an estimated 14,400, or 12%, were women.
- Twenty university students monitored these sermons by documenting key themes and people’s reactions, problems, and suggestions: Sermons covered a range of topics, but those on marriage and inheritance received the most interest. Reactions typically varied by age—younger attendees were generally more engaged and receptive—and differed by whether the mosques offered religious education for girls or other services for women and girls.
- According to the university student project monitors, 97% of the 240 individuals interviewed after the Friday sermons believed that Islamic human rights for men and women were equal and the same. For example, one of the project monitors noticed an elderly man sitting at the back of the prayer hall after one Friday sermon. The monitor asked him if he needed any help, and the man replied, “No one can help me. Now time is gone and I have committed all sorts of violence against my daughters. I have received walwar [bride price], I stopped them from getting an education, I forced their marriages. They are suffering every day because of my wrongs. Why were these Imams not talking on these issues before?” This man’s story is indicative of how effective these sermons were in impacting the community.
- More than 15,000 booklets on ending violence against women were produced and distributed among mosques: Easy-to-read booklets on the five key women’s rights issues were written in Dari and English with input from the Imams, local and international

experts, and the university students. These booklets incorporated scriptural and legal justifications, including quotations from the Quran and Hadith.

- The initial success of the program enabled WISE to extend the project for another year in twenty Kabul mosques, and to replicate the project activities in ten Jalalabad mosques: An additional 15,000 booklets were printed and distributed. Formal women's sections were created in ten Kabul mosques, where two women were assigned to lead each section. They received the same training as the Imams, and female university students were hired to monitor sermons in the women's section of the mosques.

Phase two further provided further evidence of using a religious, cultural framework to reduce violence against women:

- The Imam training program promoted community awareness about ensuring the safety and rights of women: Monitors reported that women at the mosques were very interested to learn about their rights from an Islamic perspective. Many of the women in attendance said they were interested because they are deprived of many basic rights in their communities. One of the women in the community felt that the men of the family had become more careful not to violate women's rights since the Imams began discussing them regularly.
- More than 200 women attended Imam Abdul Wasi's khutbah in Kabul: After the khutbah several of the women expressed their appreciation of the project because they now were more aware about their Islamic rights. Women particularly liked the booklets because it gave them written evidence to refer to, and empowered them to ask about their rights in education, marriage, inheritance and social participation.
- Jamila Afghani won the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding's 2010 Peacemakers in Action Award: After being nominated by WISE, Jamila won the Tanenbaum award, which honors individuals inspired by their faith to work peace on initiatives in regions of armed conflict.
- The Imam-training program was recognized by the Clinton Global Initiative as a 2010 Commitment to Action: CGI members showcased Commitments, or initiatives to address various global challenges, in order to spark constructive feedback and garner partnerships.