

Speaker: Arab women liberated

Natasha Shepard
Oregon Daily Emerald

Many of the regulations that are seen as oppressive for women in the Middle East are the policies of individual countries and not the religious beliefs of Islam, said an American Muslim woman who addressed University students as part of a Muslim Student Association and Women's Center presentation on the value of women in Islam.

Zainab Al-Godaihi, from Portland, presented her experiences along with Muzhgan Afzal, also from Portland, as part of the Muslim religion and culture in a society they said was often prejudiced against Arabs.

Recent panic about the Oklahoma City bombing has shown anti-Arab prejudices both on the street and in the media, Al-Godaihi said.

One well-known radio show host, in the days that followed the bombing, even went so far as to recommend that B-2 bombers be sent to bomb Iraq in retaliation for the Oklahoma incident, she said.

Ignorance and misunderstanding are often at the root of the blatant prejudice and racism, Al-Godaihi said.

"People who are writing and reporting the news don't understand that Muslim fundamentalism is not something to fear," she said.

Although at first she didn't think that the injustice to Arab and Islamic peoples was intentional, she said she is beginning to see the reason the media is so blatantly biased.

"They need a bad guy," Al-Godaihi said, citing the downfall of Communism and dissolution of the Soviet Union. "How

many movies have you seen where the Arabs are terrorists? They want headlines This sort of negative stereotyping comes every time you see something about Muslims in the movies or in the news."

Because she wears the traditional covering of Muslim women, showing only her face and hands, Al-Godaihi was herself a victim of violence during the Gulf War.

Her tires were slashed three times, and she was once chased into the building where she worked by a man screaming and wearing camouflage.

Afzal, who has a degree in political science from the University of Portland and is also a Muslim, explained why Muslim women cover themselves by wearing clothing that only exposes their faces and hands.

According to the *Koran*, women should wear clothing that covers all but their faces and their hands from the wrists, she said.

Historically, the reasons women dressed this way were often oppressive, she said, including theories that pre-Islamic cultures were trying to protect their property by covering the women.

Today, however, the reasons Muslim women cover themselves are more liberating than oppressive, Afzal said.

"Wearing the covering prevents being judged by physical appearance," she said. "Women have to be judged by their voice, opinion, ideas and knowledge."

Prejudice based on physical appearance is very real, she said, and can prevent some women from being hired for jobs they are qualified for.

Contrary to some stereotypes,

Wearing the covering prevents being judged by physical appearance. Women have to be judged by their voice, opinion, ideas and knowledge.

— MUZHGAN AFZAL
Muslim woman

Muslim law actually states that men and women are equal.

"There are many Islamic laws that are very appealing to women," she said.

Both men and women are encouraged to be educated, and women may make legal contracts without the consent of anybody and have equal rights in marriage and divorce, she said.

Islamic women are allowed to vote and hold political office. In Iraq, there are actually more women holding office in the parliament than there are in the U.S. Congress, she said.

Although women may work outside the home, housework is valued highly and a woman may actually charge her husband for domestic chores.

The key to understanding the value of women in Islam is knowing the differences between the policies of countries and the religion, Al-Godaihi said. For example, the Saudi Arabian policy that women can't drive is not an Islamic rule, but a government statute.

The best way to know the difference between governments' policies and Islamic religious ideology is to educate yourself and learn about Islam, she said.

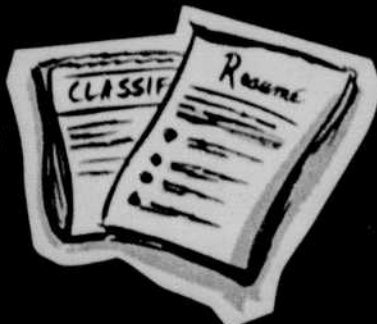
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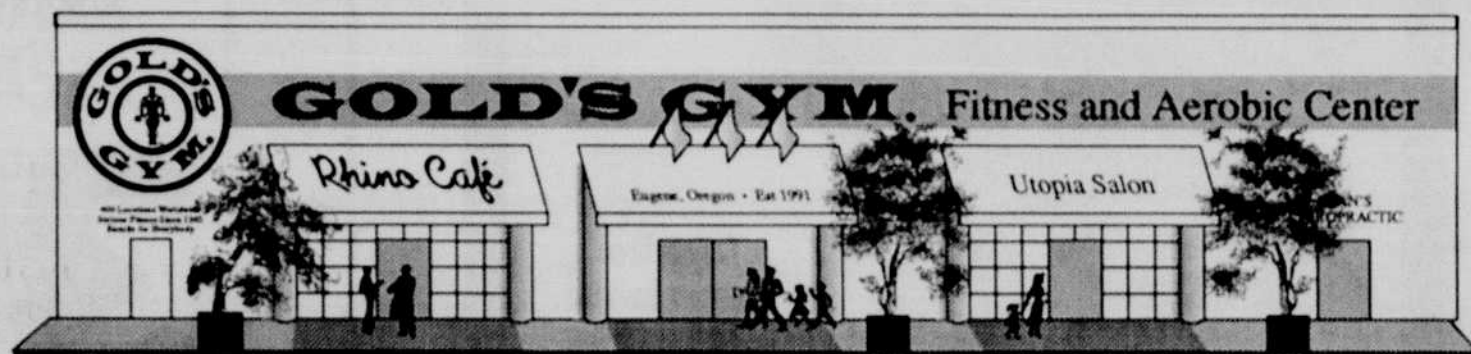
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