

washingtonpost.com

## New Magazines Reflect Muslims' Diversity

As Community Grows, Publications Aim to Offer Alternative Voice

By Omar Sacirbey  
Religion News Service  
Saturday, March 24, 2007; B09

Holding an American flag and wearing a grin beneath her head scarf, Wardaw Chaudhary, a 16-year-old from Tulsa, radiated confidence and optimism, the perfect cover girl to grace the first issue of Muslim Girl magazine.

Launched in January with the tag line "Enlighten Celebrate Inspire," the bimonthly magazine targets what Editor in Chief Ausma Khan says are 400,000 Muslim teenage girls in North America, who, like other teenagers, want a magazine that reflects their lifestyles and aspirations.

"We want to tell the stories of Muslim girls who have grown up in America," said Khan, 37. "We want to give them a voice and a forum where they can see themselves and connect to other Muslim girls, but also demonstrate how much they're part of the fabric of American life."

Muslim Girl, with a circulation approaching 50,000, is the latest of several new magazines catering to Muslim Americans. Although they reach for distinct demographics -- teenagers, professionals, mothers, secular Muslims -- they share a common motivation: to define themselves at a time when many think Muslims have surrendered that responsibility to Western media that often get them wrong.

The magazines follow a few longer-established publications, such as Islamic Horizons, published by the Islamic Society of North America, and are more than an expression of Muslim American assertiveness. They reflect the community's diversity and a growing Muslim market that is catching the eye of advertisers and distributors.

Today's Muslim Girl readers might be tomorrow's subscribers to Azizah, which premiered in late 2000 calling itself the voice for Muslim women. Azizah, which means "dear" or "strong" in Arabic, blends profiles -- about, for instance, America's first Muslim female judge and a university "campus queen" -- with articles on health, travel, food and spirituality. But the quarterly glossy, with U.S. circulation of about 40,000, also handles tougher subjects, from custody battles and AIDS in the Muslim community to inheritance laws and how to spot men who marry for green cards.

Both Muslim Girl and Azizah were launched in part to correct stereotypes of Muslim women as oppressed and uneducated, fueled largely by news from overseas.

"Islam and Muslims are reported on in this country through the lens of Middle Eastern politics. So we see the Muslim woman as the Arab woman," said Tayyibah Taylor, 54, Azizah's publisher and editor.

A reader put it this way: "The emergence of these Muslim publications presents us with the opportunity to declare who we are and what we believe unapologetically, to force others to acknowledge our increasing presence in the West, and allows us to dispel the erroneous Muslim stereotypes too often presented and accepted in Western media," Gena Chung, a 32-year-old Muslim convert and mother of three in Laurel, wrote in an e-mail.

One of the new magazines, Islamica, serves up pieces on current affairs along with articles on art, culture, science and business, as well as fiction and poetry. It, too, was born of a desire to challenge conventional views about Islam. After briefly appearing as an academic journal in the early 1990s, Islamica was revived in 2003 as a quarterly. It has a circulation of 14,000, including more than 6,000 subscribers in North America.

"By extending the scope of what people understand about the religion, it may be easier for them to contextualize events and understand where Islam is coming from and how it's evolving, as opposed to through political events that tend to distort the religion," said senior editor Firas Ahmad, who likened his magazine to the Atlantic Monthly.

"What we're trying to do is provide alternatives to what we think the mainstream media might be missing," he said.

The magazines have something in common with many others in print: financial pressures.

"Like any magazine, we've been on the brink of collapse several times in the last few years," Ahmad said. But Islamica's chances of surviving, he added, improved with the recent arrival of a publisher and a switch to a nonprofit model.

Muslim Girl hopes to make money from advertising. The Fox network and Oxford University Press have bought ads, and Khan believes

Advertisement



Barack Obama

John McCain

Arnold  
Schwarzenegger

George Bush

Hillary Clinton

Rudolph Giuliani

John Edwards

Nancy Pelosi



**Latest Politician  
News Images**

search better

Search

more big advertisers are on the way.

"One of the great untold stories here is that the American Muslim market is where the Hispanic market was five years ago, on the verge of a major breakout, and there's enormous potential to market to this audience," said Khan, who left a teaching position at Northwestern University to run Muslim Girl.

A 2004 Zogby International poll found that one in three Muslim Americans earns more than \$75,000 per year.

[Barnes and Noble](#), which carries Islamica, has announced that it will carry Muslim Girl in all but about 20 of its nearly 700 stores.

Azizah has relied mainly on Muslim-owned businesses for advertising, especially from the fashion sector. "We felt that it was very important for Muslim businesses and Muslim designers to be showcased. If not here, then where?" said Taylor, the publisher, who, with a partner, launched the magazine without bank loans.

Although many Muslims have welcomed the magazines, there has been criticism. Some Muslims have complained that Azizah features only women who wear the hijab, or head scarf, as cover girls.

Taylor's response: "We wanted the magazine to be instantly recognizable, kind of iconic as a Muslim women's magazine. And even though many Muslim women do not wear hijabs in public, when they stand to pray, they all do.

"If I have an African American woman or a Pakistani woman on there without [a] hijab, it might be any Pakistani magazine or any African American magazine. But with a woman who's covered, people know instantly."

© 2007 The Washington Post Company