

## Meet our Member Organizations

CWI's June meeting will present speakers and materials from our organization members highlighting their activities for women and girls. By joining CWI they show appreciation for our efforts and our programs. This is a great opportunity for our members and guests to hear them discuss their important missions, goals and activist priorities. Also, members will vote on the Board of Directors slate for 2011-12.

Our invited organization members include the: American Council on Education Office of Women in Higher Education; Center for Women Policy Studies; Fairfax County Commission for Women; Federally Employed Women; Feminist Majority Foundation; League of Women Voters of DC; Maryland Legislative Agenda for Women; Maryland Women's Heritage Center; Montgomery County Commission for Women; Montgomery County National Organization for Women; National Women's Law Center; Service Employees International Union (SEIU Local #500); United For Equality; Union Theological Seminary NYC; Wider Opportunities for Women; Women's Institute for a Secure Retirement (WISER); and Women's Research & Education Institute (WRED).

The Clearinghouse is a member of the National Council of Women's Organizations (NCWO), and they also have been invited to present at our June meeting.

**Date/Time: Tuesday, June 28, 2011 / 12 noon sharp to 1:30 pm**

Open to the public, no reservation necessary.

**Place: One Dupont Circle, 8th Floor Kellogg Room, Washington DC**

Bring brown bag lunch, soft drinks available from a machine.

### IMPORTANT NOTICE

A photo ID must be shown at the security desk of One Dupont Circle.  
Please allow time to go through the sign-in system.

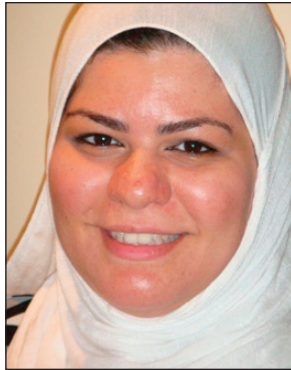
Next Meeting: Tuesday, September 27, 2011

## Arab American and Muslim Women: Dispelling Myths, Building Bridges

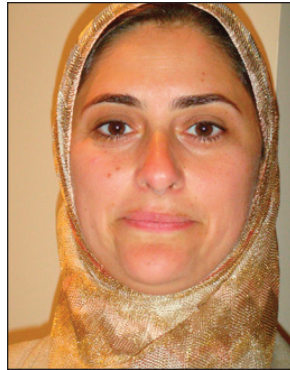
WT's May speakers were **Noha Bakr**, Montgomery County Commissioner with the Montgomery County Commission for Women, **Aseel Elborna**, the National Outreach Coordinator for the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR) and **Lobna "Luby" Ismail**, the Founder and President of Connecting Cultures LLC, who works as a training specialist with over 15 years of experience in the areas of cross-cultural communication, cultural competence, Arab and American cultures, and Islamic awareness and religious diversity.

**Aseel Elborna** opened the presentation talking about her work with CAIR, the largest American-Muslim civil rights advocacy group in the United States. She made it clear before she began that all of her views of Islamic and Muslim women are from readings and personal experiences, but she is not a scholar on the subject. She used her presentation to debunk the myths surrounding the status of women in Islam. Elborna said that the Qur'an states that women are the "twin halves of men" and that God created men and women equal; the only thing that makes one person better than the other is their level of piety, not their gender. She discussed women's rights today and stated that there are few human rights at all in Muslim countries today, for both men and women. She attributes this lack of human rights to the practices of colonization and the ruling of Muslim countries under former presidents and dictators. Colonization created a jumble of cultures and practices in Muslim countries that are

not attributed to the Islamic faith but are actually derived from their mother countries. She said that in Muslim countries women's rights take a back seat to issues of governmental oppression, and made references to the current happenings in the Middle East. She said that based on current events in Libya or Syria, for example, we can see



*Aseel Elborna*



*Noha Bakr*



*Luby Ismail*

that the rights of the people given by the Qur'an are going to take some time to go into effect after the government revolutions. Elborna finished her

segment of the presentation with a quick run down of women's rights that were listed in the Qur'an 1400 years ago, long before the women's revolution in America occurred. These rights include: a woman's property cannot be seized by her husband; a woman cannot be denied the right to an education; forced marriage is prohibited; women can initiate divorce; women can enter into contracts without interference from men; women receive equal pay for equal work; and women have the right to vote and hold public office. These are rights that are basic today but were instilled in the Qur'an in 600 AD. She concluded by saying that these rights in the Qur'an are the word of God and therefore have to be taken as they are written as their rights — not optional rights.

**Noha Bakr** opened her segment of the presentation by discussing the teachings and practice variances among both men and women and Muslim and non-Muslim countries. She expressed that there is a need for education of both men and women on the words of the Qur'an regarding

## Program Summary, continued

women's rights — and their rights need to use these words as building blocks to more equality for women. She explained that traditions vary from culture to culture; not all traditions that are thought to be Muslim are actually Muslim traditions but are more the countries cultural practices. Another problem with the practices of Muslim teachings is that there is a lack of leadership; there is no Sunni “head” equivalent to the Catholic Pope that Muslims can look to for cohesive guidance. Bakr said that in general, American Muslim women pursue higher education, work at good jobs, experience a smaller pay gap between themselves and American Muslim men than between non-Muslim men and women, and attend mosque equally, if not more frequently, than American Muslim men. She highlighted some of the issues facing American Muslim women today; the same issues that are facing all American women with the addition of discrimination, hate crimes, and other acts of racism. American Muslim women are often marginalized and viewed as “others.” She also presented many opportunities to move forward together, by working with American Muslim organizations on issues that affect everyone and reaching out to American Muslim groups with an understanding of their culture and challenges.

**Luby Ismail** shared her personal story of growing up in a small, southern, Christian town with all Evangelical Christian friends that she bonded with over their love for God as an example of how two different religions can coexist peacefully. She said that she “did the impossible” by sharing her Muslim beliefs with strong Christians and continued to show respect for one another despite their differences. Ismail defined the term “Muslim world” as being the entire world, not just one region. She stated that Muslims, just like Christians, are spread out throughout the entire world population. She then quizzed the audience on what were some images they thought of when they think of Muslim women. The answers included: head covering, length of dress, the Qur’an, subservient/submissive/conservative/oppressed/backwards, foreign/not English-speaking,

uneducated and pious. Ismail pointed out that these are all untrue stereotypes and encouraged everyone to not let the media rule the image of American Muslim women; to find their own definition by breaking boundaries and stereotypes. She mentions Asma Mahfouz, an Egyptian woman standing up for her people and asking them to fight for their civil rights, as an example of a Muslim woman taking an active role in revolutions across the world.

## Discussion

**Q: Tell us more about the organizations you are involved with.**

**A: Luby**

Connecting Cultures is an organization that I started after my first son was born. The organization works with numerous public and private groups by training them on issues dealing with Muslim cultures both in the United States and abroad.

**A: Aseel**

CAIR is an organization that works to enhance the understanding of Islam and promotes the civil rights of American Muslims. Their civil rights department includes lawyers that conduct legal advocacy and training across the county with 30 different chapters. CAIR provides educational workshops and interviews on topics related to American Muslims on all major news networks.

**A: Noha**

Noha is currently doing consulting and works for the Montgomery County Commission for Women as a familiar face for Muslim women in the community to whom they can turn to for advice and help.

**Q: What is Islam?**

**A:** Islam, along with Judaism and Christianity, is one of the three monotheistic Abrahamic religions and dates back over 1400 years. A Muslim is a person who follows the religion of Islam. Both ‘Islam and Muslim’ are derived from the Arabic

## Program Summary, continued

word which means ‘peace,’ a principle that is central to the faith. Often, the religion of Islam gets blamed for problems that are not religious, but political and economic.

Islam is a parochial system dating back to pre-Muslim years. This system is responsible for some of the traditions that are social not religious, and shows that religion is not everything when it comes to Muslim practices/culture. Issues that deal with the economy and politics are examples of issues that are Islamic, not Muslim.

***Q: What is the importance of marriage in Muslim culture? Are single/career women accepted? What about the LGBT population?***

*A:* Arranged marriages do still exist, however, they are not traditional. In fact, an older woman proposed to the Prophet Muhammad. In arranged marriages today, parochial traditions and poverty play a large role. Muslims believe that God created Adam and Eve in order to procreate, but practice a “leave them be in their homes policy” when discussing gay or lesbian individuals. They believe that “only God can judge.”

Marriage in Islam is a peaceful, respectful and loving bond of partnership in which the main criteria is that both parties agree to the marriage. Forced arranged marriages are prohibited in Islam. Where they do occur, it is the cultural practice of the people. Single and career women are certainly accepted and many Muslim women are single by choice.

***Q: Is sex segregation a part of Muslim culture?***

*A:* Segregation mainly occurs in Gulf countries, however, Americans have a bad connotation with the word “segregation” that is not always correct when used within the Muslim world. Segregation is used in a mosque for personal prayer time.

***Q: Why do you choose to, or not to, wear the head dress?***

*A: Luby*

The Qur’an says to “dress modestly” and to me, the definition of modesty is based on time and place. In America, I feel that my dress is modest enough and I do not need to wear a headdress at all times. However, I do cover my hair during prayer.

*A: Aseel and Noha*

There is a verse in the Qur’an that says that a woman needs to cover her hair, and it is a verse that we both take seriously. In a historical context, covering your hair is a sign of protection by God and wards off those looking to harm women. Muslim men also have regulation on their dress — it just is not talked about as much as Muslim women’s dress regulations. Both Aseel and Noha only started to wear the head dress in college, post 9/11, despite both of their parent’s objections. Their parents felt that they were putting themselves in harm’s way by covering their hair in a growing hostile environment for Muslims in America. However, both felt it was important to their religion and continue to cover their hair today.

## President’s Message

We close this year knowing that the Clearinghouse presented some excellent programs. Our meetings have been consistently well attended. I am so grateful to the Board who selects the topics, all of our program arrangers who handle the meeting presentations, those of you who bring the snacks, and all of our members and guests who attend.

Washington is supplying enough topics to fill next year! Look for some interesting programs. If you have any program or speaker suggestions, please let us know.

Enjoy your summer. Thank you for another wonderful year.

— Barbara J Ratner

## National Women's Law Center, Social Security

Because of all the discussion and debate on Social Security issues, NWLC has published 50 fact sheets, one for each state, to highlight “what these programs really mean to the individuals and families who rely on them ... (they) paint a picture of just how critical Social Security is for women and their families, including how many women and children receive Social Security in each state, average benefits and Social Security’s role in lifting residents out of poverty.” Contact [action@nwlc.org](mailto:action@nwlc.org).

## Feds Gender Pay Gap Better Than Private Sector

*From a Joe Davidson column, Washington Post*

“Uncle Sam strives to be the model employer, and in at least one area, he’s making progress. When it comes to equal pay for equal work, the federal government is significantly closer to that goal than the nation as a whole. Closing the gender pay gap has been the focus of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission at two dozen events around the country in April and May.

“Women in the federal government make 11 cents less on the dollar than their male counterparts according to the most recent data available from the General Accounting Office (GAO). The wage gap is even greater for women of color and women with disabilities ... By the time of retirement, the real cost of the wage gap to a woman and her family is not just lower wages but also lowered pensions and Social Security benefits.”

The glass ceiling still exists for highly educated and professionally experienced women who are unable to get selected for the top management positions that are typically filled by white men. The author points out, “Women make up less than a third of the Senior Executive Service.”

## Maryland Women in STEM

Coming soon: A new timeline exhibit *Explorations and Discoveries: Maryland Women in STEM* (science, technology, engineering, and math). Some of the notable women who will be honored include: Rachel Carson, considered the founder of the environmentalist movement; Rita Colwell, first woman director of the National Science Foundation; and Astronauts Judith Resnick and Mary Cleave, two of the first women to fly in space. For more information contact Program Chair Linda Shevitz, [lshevitz@msde.state.md.us](mailto:lshevitz@msde.state.md.us) or phone (410) 767-0428.

## New Head for Center for Women Policy studies

The Center for Women Policy Studies has elected Arizona State Senator Linda J. Lopez, who is Senate minority caucus whip, to be chair of the board of directors. There are also two new appointments to the board of directors: Susie Johnson, who leads the public policy program of the women’s division of the General Board of Global Ministries; and Yolanda Richardson, vice president for international programs at the Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids. Both Johnson and Richardson have had long-term experience working on women’s issues.

## U.N.’s Superagency for Women

*WomenseNews.org*

The U.N.’s new superagency for women is scheduled to hold a country executive board vote in June on the group’s first strategic plan. The organization, under the leadership of Executive Director Michele Bachelet (the former president of Chile), has conducted consultative sessions in 71 countries this year, seeking advice from advocates and academics around the globe.

“Regional Directors have surveyed 3,700 partner organizations. Among them, 31 percent were government representatives; 47 percent were civil-society and academic groups; and 22 percent were U.N. system members, including staffers from four groups being combined under U.N. Women ... Bachelet made sure that indigenous women views were sought out ... many participants saw a key role for U.N. women in ensuring that gender equality is factored into governments’ policies and programs. They also want U.N. women to provide a ‘knowledge hub’ for gender-equality effort.”



## Clearinghouse on Women's Issues

10401 Grosvenor Place #917

Rockville, MD 20852

FIRST CLASS MAIL

### COMING EVENTS

**July 7 Trivia Night Competition.** The Sewall-Belmont House & Museum and the Woodrow Wilson House are co-sponsoring a trivia night. You are invited to come solo or with a team and compete for prizes by testing your knowledge of trivia from the early 1900s. Prizes will be awarded for the best team name, highest score and more. Teams will sign up to compete for either the Sewall-Belmont House & Museum or the Woodrow Wilson House. The event will be held at the newly renovated Sewall-House & Museum on July 7, 6:30-8:30 pm. For more information, visit [www.sewallbelmont.org](http://www.sewallbelmont.org).

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*Photos: D. Anne Martin; Editor: Roslyn Kaiser; May summary draft by Leah Tingley, Alliance for Justice Intern; Production: Letterforms Typography & Graphic Design.*

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