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A woman I know was murdered

Joan Chittister | Dec. 21, 2006 From Where I Stand

A woman I know was murdered in September, a fact which in itself is bad enough. But this woman was not the victim of a random shooting or a back alley mugging or a rape or even of the far too common problem of domestic violence.

No, this woman was murdered because she was doing what women are not allowed to do.

I met Safia Amajan, an Afghan women, in Geneva in 2002. We were in Switzerland as delegates to the first assembly of "The Women's Global Peace Initiative." This U.N. partnership organization emerged out of Kofi Annan's "Summit of Spiritual Leaders" in 2000 was a millennium event that called for the inclusion of women in world affairs.

I have her picture in my photo album. There we are arm-in-arm, smiling into the lens of history at this life-changing moment when the appearance of women as a class on the world stage would finally broaden the world agenda, would at long last raise the concerns of the other half of the human race to the level of the real, to the level of the significant.

Safia, the Minister of Women's Affairs in the province of Kandahar, was shot in the back seat of a taxi on the way to her office. Her most significant work was opening six schools for girls -- in defiance of custom, despite opposition. (Read more [1].)

After a series of death threats she had asked for protection but never got it. Instead, two motorcyclists ambushed her taxi, shot at her through the car window and sped away. Being a woman who advocates for women's issues is clearly a dangerous, if not suicidal, thing to do. At best, some would say, it is a very unwise, unacceptable -- even immoral -- thing to do.

They say that maybe now, another woman dead, women will learn not to go where women must not go, will learn not to do what women have no right doing.

After all, the history of women, like the history of oppressed peoples everywhere, is clear: Just tell them no and they'll go away, right? Just ignore them and they'll disappear, right? Just tell them what to do and they'll get back in line.

Well, maybe. Then again, maybe not. Not if the world is going in the other direction, as it now seems it well may be. Science no longer argues for the inferiority of women, for instance. Anthropology and history take note of their early status. Medical research now studies women as women rather than simply as subsets of men. Statisticians count them as separate human beings now. And pollsters even include them in their surveys.

Anyway, whose world is it? Now, that is the fundamental question.

After all, women are the majority race. If God doesn't like girls, S/he certainly made a lot of them. And they're beginning to figure it out.

In fact, when I heard about Safia's death, I figured I ought to tell somebody about the meeting I never thought I'd attend so whoever killed her could get prepared for what's coming.

The Women's Islamic Initiative in Spirituality and Equity 2006, or WISE, met in New York City in November. Organized by the American Society for Muslim Advancement, it brought together more than 100 Muslim women -- some of them in headscarves, many not -- from 26 countries, from Afghanistan to the United States.

And they all had credentials and bios that read like the yellow pages of an international telephone book: They were physicians and teachers, writers and communication professionals, political scientists and specialists in the Qur'an, sociologists of religion and Arabic scholars, human rights activists and lawyers, artists and poets.

They are, in other words, highly educated and deeply involved in both religious and social issues, both local and global.

Most of all, they are committed to the development of the role of women in Islam. This was a meeting of Muslim feminists. Actually, it was a meeting of Muslim women leaders.

What were they doing in New York? They were organizing an international network of Muslim women for the sake of changing the world.

They talked about the difference between sharia law and the Qu'ran in much the same way that Western feminists talk about the difference between canon law and the Gospel.

They called for the recognition of women imams or prayer leaders and the ordination of "10 muftia in 10 years."

They discussed the organization of a women's shura, an advisory council of women that would interpret Islamic law for the religious leaders of a region.

They created a global fund for women designed to prepare women in Islamic jurisprudence in order to eliminate discrimination against women based on sexist interpretations of religious law.

In fact, they sounded a lot like us.

These are the women the West thinks do not exist.

I don't know who murdered Safia but I do know that they wasted their time. There are thousands of other women just like her out there. And they will not be denied either the fullness of their humanity or the integrity of their religion. This is the spirit no amount of killing can kill.

According to *The Independent*," Fariba Ahmedi, a female member of parliament who attended the burial, said: "Those enemies who have killed her should know it will not derail women from the path we are on. We will continue on our way."

From where I stand, those people who think that feminism is a Western fad which will either eventually go away or can simply be ignored, need to listen again. The roar we hear behind us is the sound of the whole wave of women around the globe for whom the Will of God means a great deal more to them than the historical

suppression of women done in its name.

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