Young, Muslim and female: An interview with Ausma Khan

by Amy Frykholm in the January 29, 2008 issue

The editor-in-chief of Muslim Girl *magazine, a bimonthly journal designed to reach Muslim teens in the U.S., is Ausma Khan. She grew up in England and Canada and has university degrees in law, political science and human rights.*

How did *Muslim Girl* get started?

At a meeting of the Islamic Society of North America, Faye Kennedy of execuGo Media heard girl after girl speak about feeling underrepresented in and alienated and marginalized by North American culture. Girls have a lot to say, but don't feel that their voices are being heard. I saw the magazine as an opportunity to continue to work on an issue that I was already working on: empowerment for women and girls.

It's interesting to hear you talk about a teen magazine as a venue for making girls' voices heard. Many people would assume that a teen magazine is focused on fashion and popular culture. How do you make girls' voices heard through the magazine?

At first tapping into girls' stories was a bit difficult. But as soon as our Web site went up, we started hearing from people all over the continent with ideas. We do two kinds of stories: one is reader-generated and the other is one in which we try to fill in the gaps. We try to lead when we think that leadership is needed.

Can you give examples of the two kinds of stories?

One of my favorites is from our inaugural issue—"Growing up American." We heard about a girls' basketball team in Atlanta called the Lady Caliphs. This was a group of Muslim girls who were at the bottom of their league until a new coach came on board. He encouraged them to see basketball playing as an act of faith. These girls were really serious competitors, but they took prayer seriously too. They moved from the bottom of their league to the top. We thought it was a great example of

how inner potential translates into outward action.

An example of the other kind of story comes from the November-December issue of 2007. Its cover story is on Darfur. We felt that this was a subject about which Muslim communities have been largely silent, yet it is mostly Muslim women and children who have been affected by sexual and physical violence in Darfur. It may be that communities are silent because the victims as well as the perpetrators are Muslim. But from our perspective, this was an issue that spoke directly to our editorial mandate: it has everything to do with the empowerment of women and girls, with the need for action to make the world better. We felt we needed to call the community to accountability.

What kind of response to that article did you receive?

Honestly, not as much as we would have liked. We get far more letters on whether or not girls shown in the magazine should wear headscarves than on some of the deeper issues in our community.

How *do* you deal with the issue of headscarves in the magazine?

Our magazine is not a religious magazine. The only religious authorities appearing in *Muslim Girl* write for an ethics column. For us the most important thing is to have a diverse representation of girls who identify as Muslim.

Though we try to treat the headscarf as a nonissue, we recognize that this is an important topic of conversation, even a defining one, in our communities. So we alternate: we have a cover that depicts a girl in a headscarf and then one that doesn't. For our September Ramadan issue, we featured two girls, one with a headscarf and one without. We try to avoid editorial commentary on the subject.

The majority of our letters say, "It's so great that you don't sit in judgment." And of course we also get letters saying, "Every girl in your magazine ought to be wearing a headscarf."

Why is the headscarf so central in conversations about Muslim identity?

Probably in part because of the visible identification that it represents. In our particular political climate, it's a symbol of the "other," and that raises all kinds of anxieties. From Muslim communities, I think there is a defensive reaction: you can't take away our rights to identify ourselves and practice our religion. For some it is a

religious requirement, but there are other religious requirements that aren't getting anywhere near as much attention.

What are the differences between Muslim teens and other American teens, and how do you work with these differences in the magazine?

A key difference is behavior. Most Muslim teens have a much stricter code. Dating, drugs, alcohol and premarital sex are not permitted, so that creates a somewhat different orientation to American popular culture. Muslim teens are perhaps more focused on family and community than their non-Muslim counterparts.

Of course, there are plenty of American teens who don't drink or have sex and who are deeply involved in family, community, volunteerism and faith. Muslim teens have a great deal in common with American teens in general.

The girls who read our magazine are very likely to read *CosmoGirl* or *Teen Vogue*. What they've told us is that they like to read these magazines, but they don't see themselves in them.

I think mainstream teen magazines are much more focused on how to meet a guy, how to attract a guy and how to keep a guy than we are. Our mission is to help girls develop themselves as human beings so that they can act on the world in positive ways.

We are a values-based publication—that is, we translate principles of faith into action; we make faith relevant and applicable to everyday life. We give girls a sense of how faith can lead to a deeper engagement with the world and help to create a more compassionate, just and equitable world. Of course, the girls who read our magazine are also interested in fashion, entertainment and sports, and we try to address those interests as well.

But we are working to enlighten and empower girls to reach their full potential, to go out into the world with no limits as to what they can achieve in academics, sports and the arts. The only limits are those imposed by faith.

What are the main points of tension for Muslim girls in American life and in their families?

We often hear from girls who want to go to the prom. We hear from girls who want to go out with a mixed group of girls and boys. A lot of traditional families would say

absolutely no to these ideas. There is a real desire to know how to navigate this situation, especially for girls who are part of a new generation of immigrants.

Our trickiest regular column is on ethics, written by Grace Song. She does a lot of research and, more than answer the questions, she canvases the tradition. For example, one girl asked, “What does modesty mean in the North American context? I don’t think that Capri pants and T-shirts are immodest, but my parents do.” In that case, Grace gave an overview of the tradition and various lines of thought in the Muslim world. Then she basically said, “Your duty is to seek knowledge and then to be true to your own conscience.” After that, we got letters that said, “T-shirts and Capri pants are absolutely unacceptable.” Again, our goal is the development of girls, not to take sides on religious questions.

How is the magazine doing financially?

We’re doing well in terms of subscriptions, but there is definitely a challenge in getting our message out to advertisers. Though marketing research shows that Muslim Americans are one of the largest untapped audiences in the U.S., it is still hard to get advertisers to see the potential. And our ads do have requirements that others don’t. There are lots of products that we could advertise, but we can’t have underdressed girls shown in the advertisements. Sometimes advertisers have to create specific ads that are appropriate to our audience, and that isn’t easy. We feel like the responsibility is really on our shoulders to get the message out, to communicate to potential advertisers and make it happen.

—Amy Frykholm