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## **Muslim Women Superheroes**

In our work at *Connecther*, I work with some amazing Muslim women -- women who run highly effective grassroots organizations or speak out against injustice. Yet despite their achievements, the media seems to always portray Muslim women as victims.

So I was excited last year when Marvel Comics introduced its latest female superhero: Kamala Khan, a 16-year-old Pakistani-American girl with amazing shape-shifting powers. This inspiring character got me thinking: How many real-life Muslim women superheroes do I know? I asked *Connecther* communications specialist

**Elaine Robbins** to profile a few of my superheroes.



### **Dr. Hawa Abdi**

When Somalia became ravaged by civil war, Dr. Hawa Abdi did what her culture's hospitality calls for: She opened her family land near Mogadishu to refugees fleeing the violence. In the decades that followed, her makeshift village grew to provide a safe refuge to 90,000 people. Alongside her two daughters, also doctors, Dr. Abdi cares for the sick at their 400-bed hospital and runs agricultural and livelihood training. When a militant militia seized her village in 2010, Dr. Abdi fearlessly faced down the soldiers. They kidnapped her, and when she was finally released, she demanded -- and received -- a written apology. Where does such determination come from? As she told Vital Voices, "My mother always told me" that no matter what happens to you, "you need to get up and help your people."



### **Muna AbuSulayman**

What could Saudi media personality Muna AbuSulayman and Microsoft founder Bill Gates possibly have in common? Plenty, as it turns out. Like Gates at his Gates Foundation, AbuSulayman is bringing tough-minded business sense to the feel-good world of philanthropy. As former secretary general of the Alwaleed Bin Talal Foundation and now as head of her own Directions Consultancy, she applies strategic thinking to some of the world's toughest problems. "I've had to educate myself," she has said. "I'm constantly asking what could be done differently or more effectively to maximize impact." Whether she's working toward female empowerment, coaching aspiring entrepreneurs, or fostering East-West relations by creating Islamic studies programs at places like Harvard and Cambridge, the TV host turned philanthropist is making a lasting impact.



### **Edna Adan**

Edna Adan could have enjoyed the comfortable life of a retired World Health Organization official. But when she returned to her native Somaliland after a high-powered career, she found the newly independent country in disarray, its health care system destroyed by the civil war with Somalia. So she sold her beloved Mercedes and her washing machine and built the Edna Adan Hospital. There, Adan and her staff are saving lives in a country with one of the highest rates of maternal and infant mortality in the world. Her latest dream? To train 1,000 midwives to work in villages across the country. Adan has delivered countless babies, but she's also given birth to something else: a new notion of what it actually means to live "a comfortable life."



### **Khalida Brohi**

At age 16, Khalida Brohi witnessed the death of a good friend in an "honor killing." That tragic event led her to found Sughar, a nonprofit that brings women to village centers across Pakistan. There women learn to make traditional embroidery that is sold to the fashion industry. In addition to learning a marketable skill, they gain literacy and learn to speak out against oppression and violence. Brohi's work has attracted international recognition, and in 2013 she sat on a panel with Bono and Facebook CEO Sheryl Sandberg at the Clinton Global Initiative. She told the audience what inspired her to accomplish so much -- all before the age of 18: "My father always told me, 'My dear, don't cry, strategize.' "



### **Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy**

Fewer than 5 percent of Hollywood directors are women, so it is cause for celebration whenever a female director wins an Oscar. But award-winning journalist and documentary filmmaker Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy has gone even further to advance women -- by shining a light on the challenges facing females in the Muslim world. She won an Academy Award in 2012 for her documentary *Saving Face*, which chronicled the struggle for justice of victims of acid attacks in her native Pakistan. "It takes one second to ruin a woman's life," she told *Glamour* magazine. "You may need a license to buy a gun, but in many places a man can buy acid from the corner store, throw it on a woman's face and from then on she is the living dead." The film helped win harsher punishment for the crime in parts of Pakistan. And like all of Obaid-Chinoy's films, it gives a voice to people whose voices are rarely heard.



### **Shirin Ebadi**

Shirin Ebadi is an Iranian lawyer, judge and professor who has devoted her career to defending human rights. Ebadi held the position of chief justice of a court in Tehran when the Islamic Revolution took power in 1979. Demoted to a clerk in her own court, she quit to practice law -- and has spent her career fearlessly defending political dissidents and fighting for women's and children's rights. Ebadi was awarded the Nobel Prize in 2003. "My aim," she has said, "is to show that those governments that violate the rights of people by invoking the name of Islam have been misusing Islam."



### **Mona El-Farra**

Trained as a physician and health chair of the Palestinian Red Crescent, Mona El-Farra has spent decades attending to the sick and injured in Gaza. Years of living under occupation has taught her that some of the wounds of conflict are invisible. That's why one of her missions is to bring to the world's attention the devastating and sometimes lasting effects on children of witnessing death and destruction. As director of Gaza Projects at the Middle Eastern Children's Alliance, El-Farra oversees programs that build playgrounds, install water purification systems in Gaza kindergartens, train mothers to help their children with trauma and encourage youth to express their feelings through participation in art, dance and performance.



### **Tawakkol Karman**

Although the Arab Spring in Egypt and Tunisia received more attention, Yemen had its own revolution. Journalist and human rights activist Tawakkol Karman helped lead the protests that called for an end to the dictatorship of Ali Abdulla Saleh. In 2011 she won the Nobel Prize for her role, sharing the prize with Liberians Leymah Gbowee and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, who helped bring an end to their country's 14-year civil war. While the final effects of Yemen's Arab Spring are still dangerously uncertain, one thing is clear: Karman and her fellow laureates have shown that women have a critical role to play in justice- and peace-building efforts.





### **Ibtihaj Muhammad**

When millions of viewers tune in to the Olympic Games next year, they may be treated to an uncommon sight: that of a woman fencing in a hijab for Team USA. New Jersey native Ibtihaj Muhammad is accustomed to being a sports ambassador for Muslim women. After all, it's not every day that people see an African American Muslim woman compete in a male-dominated sport. "I'm hoping that through my efforts and my journey as a minority athlete and as a Muslim athlete, I'm changing the face of sports," she told Zainab Salbi at the 2014 Women in the World summit. "I think that's what's so awesome about sports -- that it is able to bridge cultures." With a whoosh of her saber, Muhammad will continue to slash stereotypes wherever she goes.



### **Zainab Salbi**

Zainab Salbi is an expert on war. Not on troop movements or casualty figures, but on the side of war that isn't normally reported on the evening news: the stories of women living in a conflict zone. After growing up in war-torn Iraq, she co-founded Women for Women International, a grassroots humanitarian and development organization dedicated to helping women survivors of war. The organization has served more than 370,000 women in such places as Bosnia, Congo and Sudan. In her speaking engagements and in her three books -- *Between Two Worlds: Escape from Tyranny: Growing Up in the Shadow of Saddam*; *The Other Side of War: Women's Stories of Survival and Hope*; and *If You Knew Me, You Would Care* -- Salbi puts a human face on conflict by telling the stories of individual women who keep life going despite the horrors of war.



**Dr. Sakena Yacoobi**

Since 1995 Sakena Yacoobi has achieved the near-impossible in her native Afghanistan: She has brought quality education, health care, and literacy and life skills training to 11 million people. In the process, the organization she founded, the Afghan Institute of Learning, has become one of the largest employers of women in Afghanistan. How did one woman -- or any of these Muslim women superheroes, for that matter -- achieve so much? Ironically, by starting small. After appealing to a local mullah, she was given permission to open one school. Within a year, she had started 27 schools teaching 50,000 children. "When you have a passion for something," she has said, "you keep going."