

THE TANDEM PROJECT

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UNITED NATIONS, HUMAN RIGHTS, FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF

SOMALI WOMEN MAKE MINNEAPOLIS THEIR BUSINESS

Issue: Somali Women Make Minneapolis Their Business – Empowerment of Women and Girls

For: United Nations, Governments, Religions or Beliefs, Academia, NGOs, Media, Civil Society

Review: MINNEAPOLIS (WOMENWENEWS) *Somali Women Make Minneapolis Their Business*, by Kris Berggren, WeNews correspondent, 23 December 2007, is an article on “Somali women who left refugee camps in Kenya or Ethiopia are building business lives out of the cold climate of Minnesota. Visible for now in checkout lanes, many maintain a tradition of pooling resources so they can become their own boss.” Their hope is to own and run a department store targeting Somali and other Minneapolis shoppers in the tradition of small cottage industries of Somali women in their countries or origin. The United Nations looks for best practices or **models of success** in the implementation of human rights objectives. This is a best practice example of encouraging the dignity and fundamental rights of women and girls. It focuses on women’s empowerment amid issues of intolerance and discrimination based on religion and traditions. The full article is at the end of the attached Word Document.

This Review & Issue Statement introduces The Tandem Project Country & Community Database, a system for collecting and disseminating information from around the world on Article 18 – Everyone has a right to freedom of religion or belief – of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the 1981 UN Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief. Database **replies** are for United Nations Universal Periodic Reviews, Treaty-body and Special Procedures reports. Individuals are invited to submit replies from geographic community locations and communities of interest. An attached Word Document demonstrates the use of the Database to reply to this Review and Issue Statement.

Objective: Build understanding and support for Article 18, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights –Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion - and the 1981 UN Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief. Encourage the United Nations, Governments, Religions or Beliefs, Academia, NGOs, Media and Civil Society to use these international human rights standards as essential for *long-term solutions* to conflicts based on religion or belief.

Challenge: In 1968 the United Nations deferred work on an International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Religious Intolerance, because of its apparent complexity and sensitivity. In the twenty-first century, a dramatic increase of intolerance and discrimination on grounds of religion or belief is motivating a worldwide search to find solutions to these problems. This is a challenge calling for enhanced dialogue by States and others; including consideration of an International Convention on Freedom of Religion or Belief for protection of and accountability by all religions or beliefs. The tensions in today’s world inspire a question such as:

- Should the United Nations adopt an International Convention on Freedom of Religion or Belief?

Extracts: Extracts are presented under the Eight Articles of the 1981 U.N. Declaration on the Elimination of all Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief. Examples of extracts are presented prior to the Issue Statement for each Review.

4. 1 All States shall take effective measures to prevent and eliminate discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief in the recognition, exercise and enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms in all fields of civil, economic, political, social and cultural life.

4.1.2: *Economic*

4.1.5: *Cultural Life*

MINNEAPOLIS (WOMENSENEWS)--Sabah Yusuf wants to create what she calls a "first" for African women in the United States: a large department store that they collectively own and manage. The women she's talking about are Somalis, who have made Minneapolis, a city of 382,000, home to the largest concentration of the East African group in the Western world. About 14,000 Somalis live in Hennepin County, which includes the city and its nearest suburbs. Minnesota overall, with its frigid climate and population of 5 million that is 90 percent white, is home to more than 20,000 Somalis.

In a capital-pooling tradition harking back to her African homeland, Yusuf, executive director of the Aishah Center for Women, hopes that eventually 100 women will invest as much as \$5,000 each in the Khadijah Women's Cooperative, which plans to own and run a store targeting Somali and other Minneapolis shoppers. By early February she expects to announce a location and finish a business plan.

But Yusuf will also be pleased if the Aishah Center can raise even 10 percent of the seed money from owner-investors. She says at least 33 women have expressed interest, as have institutional backers such as the Women's Foundation of Minnesota in Minneapolis and the Christian Sharing Fund in St. Paul, a local counterpart of the Washington-based Catholic Campaign for Human Development.

"It's too early yet to predict a timetable or what will happen," says Lee Roper-Batker, president and CEO of the Women's Foundation of Minnesota. "Women have to have big audacious goals. That is the way change happens."

Meditating in the Mall of America

About three years ago in response to employee requests, the Mall of America in suburban Bloomington created a meditation room that employees may use for prayer, said Dan Jasper, the mall's director of public relations. The mall, the nation's largest, employs about 1,200 people in administration, maintenance and support staffs, while its hundreds of tenant stores, restaurants and entertainment venues employ 10,000 more. Even at "hijab-friendly" stores, occasional flaps occur over how Muslim employees should balance their religious duties with their job requirements.

Target did not respond to a request for an interview to discuss its policies on those issues, but a Minneapolis store manager said it handles employees' concerns about race or religion on a case-by-case basis. For example, Muslim employees at the downtown store who wish to pray have arranged to rotate their breaks.

One Muslim employee verified that she is willing to scan packaged pork products but when another Muslim isn't, the employee might be transferred to a non-grocery department.

A cashiering job may be a springboard to economic stability, but it's rarely the ultimate goal of Somali women, says Yusuf, who has lived in the United States for 17 years, first in San Diego and, since 1998, in Minneapolis. "They love doing business; they love being their own boss."

Traditionally, Yusuf says, Somali women supported one another's businesses and provided capital infusions by pooling resources in a "hagebad." Each woman in a hagebad contributes a monthly amount and takes her turn receiving the kitty on a rotating basis.

That practice continues to thrive here, Yusuf says, giving women access to funds they otherwise would not have, since many avoid credit cards and conventional banking services because of their religious beliefs.

ISSUE STATEMENT: This article points out the difficulties and the advantages of establishing an identity as a Muslim in a community such as Minneapolis. "Many families arrived from refugee camps in Kenya or Ethiopia with little but a few suitcases and phone numbers of relatives or resettlement agencies. But Minnesota has a strong economy and abundance of service-sector jobs and female community leaders say economic and educational **opportunities** here trump the hardships," according to the article. Minneapolis also has many financial backer helping Somali women such as the Women's Foundation of Minnesota, the Christian Sharing Fund of St. Paul and the Africa Development Center of Minnesota, "which teaches U.S. financial and business practices to African entrepreneurs and offers loans with a special repayment structure that suits Muslims, whose religion restricts paying or charging interest."

But intolerance and discrimination against Muslims persists in Minnesota, as elsewhere in the Western world, for Somali cultural and religious traditions. "Women wearing Muslim dress are visible targets for racial and religious **hostility**, especially since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. While not all employers are tolerant of observant Muslims' requests for prayer breaks and dress codes that accommodate flowing headscarves or long-sleeved clothing," Target, the large national retail-store chain with headquarters in Minneapolis, allows "local retail employees to wear skirts instead of khaki pants and head scarves in black, white or the Target signature red."

Economic progress for Minneapolis Somali women is an example of respect for cultural-religious diversity shown by many Minnesotans. There are observers of Islam which hold that the Muslim faith, by its very nature, will have a hard time **accepting** the underlying principles of democracy as they relate to freedom of religion or belief in the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This calls for respectful dialogue on the values of International Human Rights Standards on Freedom of Religion or Belief in tandem, with respect for the rights of all religions or beliefs.

To reply to this Issue Statement open The Tandem Project Country & Community Database link for the 1981 UN Declaration and scroll to: Article 4.1.2 and 4.1.5:

<http://www.tandemproject.com/databases/forms/card.htm>

The Tandem Project: a non-profit, non-governmental organization established in 1986 to build understanding and respect for diversity of religion or belief, and prevent discrimination in matters relating to freedom of religion or belief. The Tandem Project has sponsored multiple conferences, curricula, reference materials and programs on Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil

and Political Rights – Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion - and the 1981 United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief. The Tandem Project initiative was launched in 1986 as the result of a co-founder representing the World Federation of United Nations Associations (WFUNA) at a 1984 United Nations Geneva Seminar, *Encouragement of Understanding, Tolerance and Respect in Matters Relating to Freedom of Religion or Belief*, called by the UN Secretariat on ways to implement the 1981 UN Declaration. In 1986, The Tandem Project organized the first NGO International Conference on the 1981 UN Declaration.

The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights First Preamble: “*Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.* This principle suggests all States recalling their history, culture and constitution, provide equal protection by law for *theistic, non-theistic and atheistic beliefs, as well as the right not to profess any religion or belief.* This is international law under the United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. International Human Rights Standards on Freedom of Religion or Belief are essential for *long term solutions* to conflicts based on religion or belief.

The Tandem Project Executive Director: Michael M. Roan, mroan@tandemproject.com.

The Tandem Project is a UN NGO in Special Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations

WORD DOCUMENT ATTACHED

THE 1981 U.N. DECLARATION ON THE ELIMINATION OF ALL FORMS OF INTOLERANCE AND OF DISCRIMINATION BASED ON RELIGION OR BELIEF

Proclaimed by the General Assembly of the United Nations
25 November, 1981 (Resolution: 36/55)

Considering that one of the basic principles of the Charter of the United Nations is that of the dignity and equality inherent in all human beings, and that all Member States have pledged themselves to take joint and separate action in co-operation with the Organization to promote and encourage universal respect for and observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms for all, without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion,

Considering that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenants on Human Rights proclaim the principles of non-discrimination and equality before the law and the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief,

Considering that the disregard and infringement of human rights and fundamental freedoms, in particular the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or whatever belief, have brought, directly or indirectly, wars and great suffering to humankind, especially where they serve as a means of foreign interference in the internal affairs of other States and amount to a kindling hatred between peoples and nations,

Considering that religion or belief, for anyone who professes either, is one of the fundamental elements in his conception of life and that freedom of religion or belief should be fully respected and guaranteed,

Considering that it is essential to promote understanding, tolerance and respect in matters relating to freedom of religion or belief and to ensure that the use of religion or belief for ends inconsistent with the Charter of the United Nations, other relevant instruments of the United Nations and the purposes and principles of the present Declaration is inadmissible,

Convinced that freedom of religion or belief should also contribute to the attainment of the goals of world peace, social justice and friendship among peoples and to the elimination of ideologies or practices of colonialism and racial discrimination,

Noting with satisfaction the adoption of several, and the coming into force of some conventions, under the aegis of the United Nations and of the specialized agencies, for the elimination of various forms of discrimination,

Concerned by manifestations of intolerance and by the existence of discrimination in matters of religion or belief still in evidence in some areas of the world,

Resolved to adopt all necessary measures for the speedy elimination of such intolerance in all its forms and manifestations and to prevent and combat discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief,

Proclaims this Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief:

ARTICLE 4: EFFECTIVE MEASURES

4. 1 *All States shall take effective measures to prevent and eliminate discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief in the recognition, exercise and enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms in all fields of civil, economic, political, social and cultural life.*

4.1.5: Cultural Life

Somali Women Make Minneapolis Their Business

Run Date: 12/23/07

*By Kris Berggren
WeNews correspondent*

Somali women who left refugee camps in Kenya or Ethiopia are building business lives out of the cold climate of Minnesota. Visible for now in checkout lanes, many maintain a tradition of pooling resources so they can become their own boss.



Faduma Hashi

Credit: Kris Berggren

MINNEAPOLIS (WOMENSENEWS)--Sabah Yusuf wants to create what she calls a "first" for African women in the United States: a large department store that they collectively own and manage.

The women she's talking about are Somalis, who have made Minneapolis, a city of 382,000, home to the largest concentration of the East African group in the Western world. About 14,000 Somalis live in Hennepin County, which includes the city and its nearest suburbs.

Minnesota overall, with its frigid climate and population of 5 million that is 90 percent white, is home to more than 20,000 Somalis.

In a capital-pooling tradition harking back to her African homeland, Yusuf, executive director of the Aishah Center for Women, hopes that eventually 100 women will invest as much as \$5,000 each in the Khadijah Women's Cooperative, which plans to own and run a store targeting Somali and other Minneapolis shoppers. By early February she expects to announce a location and finish a business plan.

But Yusuf will also be pleased if the Aishah Center can raise even 10 percent of the seed money from owner-investors. She says at least 33 women have expressed interest, as have institutional backers such as the Women's Foundation of Minnesota in Minneapolis and the Christian Sharing Fund in St. Paul, a local counterpart of the Washington-based Catholic Campaign for Human Development.

"It's too early yet to predict a timetable or what will happen," says Lee Roper-Batker, president and CEO of the Women's Foundation of Minnesota. "Women have to have big audacious goals. That is the way change happens."

Tradition of Enterprise

Yusuf's dream may be big, but she and other Somalis say their countrywomen have always been enterprising. Back home many operated cottage industries selling produce from family farms or making clothing. Here, many carry on that tradition by operating small retail shops in one of several Somali malls or "souks" in Minneapolis. Central to the success of both is the practice of Somali women supporting each other's business enterprises.

Faduma Hashi owns the Starlight Cafe, a bakery and coffee shop selling Western and Somali pastries and other delicacies in the Midtown Global Market that features dozens of ethnic shops and restaurants in a large mixed-use office and residential building.

"Nothing beats being your own boss," says Hashi, a mother of eight who has lived in the United States for 20 years.

Hashi received start-up assistance from the African Development Center of Minnesota, which teaches U.S. financial and business practices to African entrepreneurs and offers loans with a special repayment structure that suits Muslims, whose religion restricts paying or charging interest.

Minneapolis also offers an alternative financing program that matches funds lent by organizations such as the African Development Center.

About 60 percent of small business owners seeking loans through the African Development Center are women, says Nimo Farah, coordinator for the center's program to assist those in the process of buying their first home.

Opportunities Trump Hardships

Many families arrived from refugee camps in Kenya or Ethiopia with little but a few suitcases and phone numbers of relatives or resettlement agencies. Besides poverty, hurdles include the language barrier and high rates of single parenthood. Women wearing traditional Muslim dress are also visible targets for racial and religious hostility, especially since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

But Minnesota has a strong economy and abundance of service-sector jobs and female community leaders say economic and educational opportunities here trump the hardships.

"I am very proud of the work and the energy that Somali women put in their families and how much they've struggled," says Farah, who arrived here as a child with her mother and seven siblings in 1994. Their father joined the family this year. "They find creative ways to keep their families together and put food on the table . . . I don't know if I would be able to do half of what my mom has done."

"I think overall the Somali women are doing so well when you see what they have been through," agrees Amira Ahmed, a community organizer and interpreter.

Ahmed, a divorced mother of three, estimates that 80 percent of Somali families she works with are headed by single mothers. Many men died in the fighting or stayed behind while sending their families abroad, and divorce is not uncommon. She says women with large families frequently hold two jobs while managing their households and sending money to relatives back home or helping out others here.

Many Somali women are employed in the retail sector while they save for the day when they start their own businesses. While not all employers are tolerant of observant Muslims' requests for prayer breaks and dress codes that accommodate flowing headscarves or long-sleeved clothing, some are, at least to a degree. For example, it's common to see hijab-wearing employees staffing checkout lanes and dressing rooms at retail stores like TJ Maxx and Target.

"Target is the target," jokes Safiya Ahmed (no relation to Amira Ahmed), a biochemistry and medical technology major at the University of Minnesota who's lived here for seven years. She doesn't work at Target but has high school friends who do, and she appreciates the company's efforts to accommodate Muslims' modest dress code. Target's local retail employees may wear skirts instead of the usual khaki pants, along with a head scarf in black, white or Target's signature red. "It really made me feel good (to know) there are some ways we can negotiate," she said.

Meditating in the Mall of America

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suburban Bloomington created a meditation room that employees may use for prayer, said Dan Jasper, the mall's director of public relations.

The mall, the nation's largest, employs about 1,200 people in administration, maintenance and support staffs, while its hundreds of tenant stores, restaurants and entertainment venues employ 10,000 more.

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Kris Berggren is a freelance journalist in Minneapolis and a columnist and contributor to the National Catholic Reporter.

