



# Muslim woman becomes first female Marriage Registrar

By Farah El Alfy in Cairo, Egypt

Amal Soliman, a 32-year-old Egyptian woman, has endured harassment, intimidation, and ridicule in the year since she applied for a job as the Muslim world's first *mazouna*, or female marriage registrar, but she says her victory has been worth the fight.

In late September, Soliman, who holds a Masters degree in Islamic Sharia law, broke into what has until now been an exclusively males-only club.

However, the Committee of Egyptian Mazouns, an all-male organisation, challenged



Soliman's application saying the job would be inappropriate for a woman and voiced their opinion in a statement issued by the committee.

A marriage officer presides over a wedding (or divorce) ceremony, recites verses from the Quran and signs the official certificates making the union legally binding.

Al Jazeera recently spoke with Soliman shortly after she conducted her first wedding ceremony on October 25.

Amal Soliman was ridiculed for wanting to be a marriage registrar [Jasmin Blauomy]

**Al Jazeera: Why did you decide to apply for a position that has traditionally – and**

**for centuries – been a male vocation?**

**Soliman:** In 2007 one of the two marriage officers of my neighbourhood passed away, leaving behind a job opportunity.

For three months everyone wondered who would be able to replace Al Hagg Abou Mesalam and right before the deadline (October 2007) for applying I rushed over to the civil court in Zagazig, the heart of rural Egypt, to give in my application.

I had been interested in pursuing a doctorate degree in Islamic studies but also maintaining a flexible job that would allow me to spend time with my three children.

Legally, there is no reason why a woman can't do the job, and the Mufti (Islamic scholar and interpreter of Islamic law) said it was religiously acceptable as it is only an administrative position.

In October 2007, my husband and I formally submitted an application to the local family court clerk for the post of marriage officer.

**Was your application accepted?**

Well, I took my husband with me because I was afraid I would be made fun of, which I was.

When I applied the man at the desk laughed openly at me and said that it was just not possible.

He imagined I would go home and forget about it, but instead I argued and told him that I had studied Sharia Law and I know it is an administrative job.

Though the clerk refused to accept my submission, I turned to Ibrahim Darwish, head of the local magistrate in Zagazig for his opinion.

Darwish was puzzled; he said there was no precedent for this situation so he did not know what to say. I took that as a sign that there was a small window of opportunity.

I then consulted Khaled el-Shalkamy, the head judge of Zagazig's family court.

I told him it was my right to be nominee as I was extremely qualified.

I told him just to accept me and let the other people involved in the selection process do the rest.

### **Were there no other applicants for the job?**

Actually, I was in competition with 10 other candidates, all men, but none of them held post-graduate degrees in Sharia law like I did.

So el-Shalkamy accepted my application.

On February 25, I couldn't hold back my tears as I stood in front of the local court and was appointed as my district's new mazouna.

But the battle was half-won. I would not be able to begin work as a mazouna until Mamdouh Marei, the Egyptian minister of justice, formally signed off and authorised my appointment.

**But many males did not accept the idea that a woman could hold what has been a man's job and you were targeted in the media.**

**The chairman of the Committee of Egyptian Mazouns, Muhammad Abou Ayeeta, said "the Ministry [of Justice] should refuse the appointment, because it is unacceptable that women would work in this occupation."**

### **How did you deal with the backlash?**

Well, at first my optimism slowly started to fade as I saw so much opposition.

But there were two main reasons for the opposition I faced. Firstly, it is simply rooted in male chauvinism. These people believe the woman's place is firmly in her house.

The other group was comprised of uneducated people who have developed an image of women's role in Islam from television; usually based on the words of a sheikh with a turban on his head.



**Soliman with her husband and children [EPA]**

Arguments made against me claimed that a woman couldn't perform marriages because of menstruation, as religion prevents women from praying or entering a mosque during her monthly cycle.

Others claimed that it was inappropriate for a woman to sit amongst men during the signing of the marriage certificates, which is traditionally predominately a male gathering where the marriage officer sits directly between the groom and his father-in-law.

### **Did no religious authority or group support you?**

Well, four months after contacting the Ministry of Justice and receiving no word, I contacted the National Council for Women for a louder voice and stronger backing.

Both my opponents and proponents were beginning to wonder if I would ever receive the approval of the ministry of justice.

From the first moment that my papers were accepted as a nominee, the national press caught wind of this unusual event.

A journalist in *Al Akhbar*, one of Egypt's leading newspapers, heard about the situation, and helped launch my cause as a national debate.

Eventually the news went global. I think the media was a catalyst and made my appointment go through faster than it would have.

It made me happy to have so much international coverage ... Sometimes when I'm sitting alone I wonder if I'm dreaming. What is going on? Did we really pull this off?

I'm happy not just for me; I had always wanted to show the world Egypt's developments with regards to women rights and gender equality.

### **But you did not get ministry approval until September 27; why did it take the ministry so long?**

Of course I was happy and relieved, but more importantly I regained my confidence when the minister finally signed my appointment. I had slowly started to doubt myself up to that point.

However, I now believe that the minister had to be cautious, as this case was the first of its kind.

But laws are not religion. We can develop them.

*On November 14, the United Arab Emirates followed in Egypt's footsteps and appointed Fatima Saeed Obeid Al Awani as a mazouna in the Abu Dhabi Judicial Department.*

*Source: Aljazeera*