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Obituaries	Published Friday, Jan. 25, 2002, in the San Jose Mercury News
Business & Stocks	
Technology	
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Arts & Ent.	Women offer crash course in
Opinion	
Weekly Sections	Islam 101
Perspective	
Columnists	By Sue Hutchison
Weather	Mercury News Staff Columnist
Archives	
Seven Day Archives	Five Afghan and Pakistani women who came to Mountain View
Nuevo Mundo	City Hall this week have become professors of a sort since the
<u>Viet Mercury</u>	world changed on Sept. 11. Rosemary Stasek, the Mountain View
	councilwoman who invited them to speak, described them as part
	of a community crash course in ``Islam 101."
<u>Homepage</u>	That sounds about right to Nabiha Mauiyyedi, who spoke about
Comics	her experiences as a student in her native Pakistan. She's frustrated
<u>Entertainment</u>	that so many of her neighbors and colleagues in San Jose, where
Sports	she works as a manufacturing engineer, are getting the picture that
<u>Health</u>	all Muslim women are beaten down by their religion.
Mortgage Chart	
<u>Classifieds</u>	
Find a Job	Culture, poverty are keys
Find a Car	
Find a Home	``Many of the problems facing women in Pakistan and
YellowPages	Afghanistan have to do with aspects of the culture and with
Home Improvement Home Valuation	poverty, not religion," she said after the panel discussion. ``It is
Marketplace	difficult to explain this to people who are learning about us for the
marketptace	first time, under these circumstances."
	In a country that likes its heroes and villains drawn in black and
Advertising Info	white, it's tempting to latch on to talk-show sound bites such as,
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"We love freedom and they hate it, so they hate us." Too often, they is interpreted to mean all Muslims.

Sofia Agboatwalla, another member of the panel, has been stunned to hear these messages parroted by people who are getting their first education in Middle Eastern politics. ``Of course, statements like this are simply not true, but this is what so many people in this country are hearing from the media," she said. ``It is a way of portraying Islam as a barbaric religion."

The women have been trying to spread a message that's difficult to hear for many people who couldn't have found Afghanistan on a map five months ago. They want to describe the tragedies and challenges still facing women in their countries without making them seem simply like victims of America's New Enemy.

Even as they acknowledge the Taliban's appalling treatment of women, they explain, for example, that many freely choose to wear veils as a form of modesty and devotion to their religion. But a lot of people flying American flags on their car antennas aren't likely to make the distinction.

Uphill battle

It's this kind of confusion that has led some of Agboatwalla's well-meaning neighbors to tell her she shouldn't wear her head-scarf just in case she's mistaken in the streets as a follower of the Taliban. Even that show of support let her know that her efforts to spread awareness would be an uphill battle.

The good news is more and more people are showing up to hear the women's discussion panels. Several dozen came to hear them at Mountain View City Hall, and many wanted to know how they could help sponsor Afghan widows or provide scholarships for girls in Pakistan.

"It's important for people to know that even though women have a long way to go in these countries, things are improving and there is hope," Mauiyyedi said. "We just have to keep increasing opportunities."

Some on the panel have been working for years to provide better education for women in their countries, but they had a very small audience until the World Trade Center crashed to the ground.

Maybe those who come to take their course in ``Islam 101" will help use the terror of Sept. 11 to see the women behind the veils

Women offer crash course in Islam 101 (1/25/2002)

and help them move forward.
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