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Louisville Scholar Recognized by International Women's Rights Group

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On Jan. 26, 1997, Amel Zenoune-Zouani, an Algerian law student, boarded a bus from her dorm in Algiers to the district of Sidi-Moussa where her family lived. As the bus approached the suburb, it encountered a barricade and thus stopped. The thugs boarded the bus, pulled Amel out and slit her throat. She fell and died. She was only 22.

Her killers were from the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), a group of fanatical fundamentalists. In the 1980s and '90s, its gangsters unleashed a reign of terror against the people of Algeria, showing up at schools, workplaces, and social gatherings and leaving after cutting as many throats as they could in an attack.

One of the reasons for the stubborn ignorance in some societies is their inability to curb the forces of backwardness that want to keep women behind. Consequently, women face resistance, threats and violence, as they seek to employ their God-given talents to pursue their dreams. These societies thus remain deprived of the creative energies of many women. Naturally, progress, modernity and human equality remain elusive.

But then there are brave women who refuse to succumb to fear. Some of them pay the ultimate price, as did Zenoune-Zouani. She had ignored the fanatics' warnings not to pursue education. Her mother set another example of courage. She encouraged her other daughter to carry on the mission. Amel's younger sister studied law and did become a lawyer.

Dynamic women in these societies need moral and material help from the free world as their own governments fail them. International Action Network for Gender Equity and Law (IANGEL), a California-based group of lawyers, is doing that. It says, "We harness the power of pro bono legal assistance, connecting it to the cause of women's rights, locally, nationally, and around the world."

In 2015, IANGEL established a Rights & Leadership Award to "honor exemplary leaders promoting women's rights and gender equality." The 2015 award went to Yoana Tchoukleva and Andrea Carlise "for their passionate advocacy and contribution to gender equity, human rights, and inclusion." The 2017 award went to Kim Thuy Seelinger "for her outstanding contributions as an advocate for global women's rights, and trailblazing work in holding the former dictator of Chad accountable for rape as a war crime and violation of international human rights."

The 2016 award went to Karima Bennoune, "who has spent her career advocating and supporting democracy, equality, and human and gender rights." Bennoune is also of Algerian origin. In a TED talk, she said that in June 1993, the GIA terrorists came to the apartment of her professor father, Mahfoud, a vocal opponent of extremism. His calls to the police went unanswered, and a young Karima grabbed a knife to confront the attackers.

She says, “Luckily, my father had recently installed a metal door in the wake of killings of Algerian intellectuals like the erudite writer Tahar Djaout or Mahfoud Boucebcj, one of Africa’s leading psychiatrists.” The terrorists thus could not break in and went back. As the threats against intellectuals increased, her father moved her family out of Algeria. Today, she teaches law at the University of California, Davis.

In 2018, IANGEL named the award after Zenoune-Zouani, and it went to Angela Bradstreet, a judge of the San Francisco Superior Court, “for her unwavering championship of the advancement of women in the legal profession, her effective leadership for gender equality, and her dedication to mentoring the next generation of leaders for equality and justice.”

Joining this group of brave soldiers of freedom and human equality is Louisville’s own, Dr. Riffat Hassan, University of Louisville professor emerita. She will receive the 2019 award on April 25, at IANGEL’s sixth anniversary gala dinner in San Francisco. She was nominated by Karen Torjesen, Margo L. Goldsmith Professor of Women’s Studies in Religion at California’s Claremont Graduate University and an opinion contributor to Huffington Post.

I am privy to the letter Hassan received from Nancy Newman, the founder and president of IANGEL. Newman writes, “Your passionate commitment to women’s human rights represents everything that we are working for at IANGEL. Your groundbreaking work to elucidate the Qu’ran as rooted in fairness and affirming the equal dignity of women has made an immeasurable impact on the struggle to protect the human rights of women and girls.”

In my humble opinion, Dr. Hassan is a deserving recipient. I fully support the use of the adjective courageous. Courage gushes out of her soul, as she thunders while interpreting the Qu’ran as a message of human dignity and equality. She is the founder of The Salam Network, a group of scholars and activists of diverse religious backgrounds committed to spreading peace. Salam is Arabic for peace.

The efforts of IANGEL and TSN constitute a drop in the bucket. The mission of eradicating ignorance is a monumental one. It’s the duty of the free people everywhere to support it through any possible way. Amel means hope. Let’s not let the hope die.