

# Islamic tribunals setting off alarm bells: speaker



Photo by SABRINA BYRNES

Guest speaker Hoda Fahmy, a board member for the Federation of Muslim Women, talks about the impact of Sharia law.

By MELANIE CUMMINGS

Special to The Champion

A local group dedicated to securing equality for women on an international scale is now focused on Muslim women living in their midst.

Business and Professional Women of Halton (BPW) learned last week about how arbitration courts set up in Ontario are operating without any checks and balances.

These tribunals allow people in conflict to turn to faith-based courts to settle custody, divorce and inheritance cases only. It's also a cost-saving fast track.

But specifically, Islamic arbitration tribunals recently created in the province are setting off alarm bells in the community.

Hoda Fahmy, a Canadian-born practicing Muslim, shed light on the controversy at BPW's January 19 meeting at

Rattlesnake Point Golf Club. Ms Fahmy is a board member of the Federation of Muslim Women, which is also dedicated to garnering women's equality.

The storm centres on the term Sharia law. The Islamic tenet typically conjures brutal news images of Muslim women living in far-off countries, who have been accused of adultery, being publicly stoned, and hands of convicted thieves being cut off, said Ms Fahmy.

When the Islamic Institution of Civil Justice created a Muslim arbitration court in the province, with Sharia law as its guide, it prompted widespread concern.

This Muslim board is the latest addition to faith-based judicial tribunals.

Jewish and Christian faiths have been operating their own religious arbitration courts since the Ontario Arbitration Act was introduced in 1991.

The fact that these other alternative judiciaries have operated without controversy has Ms Fahmy wondering about a racist element to the debate.

"Concerns that Muslim arbitrators won't act or operate according to Canadian laws, is racist thinking. What makes a Muslim less law-abiding than another?" she asked.

While these arbitration tribunals can apply religious ideals to the decisions, they must operate within Canadian laws and both parties have to agree to go this route.

More importantly, discussion about these faith-based tribunals should be focused on their lack of accountability, added Ms Fahmy.

The problem lies with the lack of rules and safeguards in these alternative courts, she said.

Currently there are no requirements to

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