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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.

Contact Sue Hutchison at shutchison@sjmercury.com or (650) 688-7593.

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