

# ALL WE ARE SAYING IS: GIVE PEACE A CHANCE

More British Muslims are tackling Islamic extremism and reclaiming their faith from the fanatics. Mary Murtagh meets four remarkable women who are spreading the word about their religion and its non-violent message

Sakinah, left, and Rabiah Abdullah make up the hijab-wearing rappers Pearls of Islam.

**a** common bond unites two rappers, a lawyer and a community activist, despite the fact that these women have never met. Each is taking a stand against the hatred, extreme views and violence carried out in the name of the religion they hold dear. And they are making waves worldwide with their Islamic message of peace and reconciliation.

The Abdullah sisters, Ifath Nawaz and Saran Khan are undeterred by their critics who use the internet to undermine their efforts. Instead, these women use intellect, creativity and passion to fight back against the negativity surrounding their religion.

The rappers Rabiah and Sakinah Abdullah use their music to evangelise about the Islam rooted in love and justice that they follow.

The lawyer Nawaz has the ear of the British government and uses her influence to make sure that the moderate Muslim voice is heard.

The activist Khan's "jihad against violence" campaign, launched in June, quickly put her and her cause on the international stage. It continues to gain momentum and attract supporters.

Here, these four inspirational Muslim women share their motivation for standing up and being counted in the name of Islam.

## Rabiah and Sakinah Abdullah, rappers

The hijab-wearing rappers Pearls of Islam are used to raising eyebrows.

Their unique brand of music turns its back on the usual rap lyrics about violence and greed and celebrates Islam instead.

The Pearls of Islam band members and sisters Rabiah and Sakinah Abdullah are part of a growing Islamic music scene that seeks to spread religious and pacifist messages, rather than angry or money-obsessed ones.

"We're not everyone's cup of tea," says Rabiah. "Sometimes we get a mixed reaction – there are people who love us and then others who don't know how to act when we perform. As soon as we stand on stage wearing a hijab, that says something. It says that we are not who you think we are. It's sending a message out and people just have to deal with it.

"I hope that we are inspirational for young Muslim sisters. Some people do not agree with ladies going on stage and that's fine, we respect their views. But we do not have to justify ourselves."

The Pearls are passionate and enthusiastic performers. On stage they wear brightly coloured hijabs and get their audience singing along with songs such as *Spiritual Refuge* and *The Guide*.

They rap; sing Islamic songs of praise, nasheeds, in both English and Arabic; recite poetry; and do spoken-word performances playing traditional doumbek and djembe drums as accompaniment.

Sakinah, 22, has just graduated from the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies with a degree in Arabic and Islamic studies. Rabiah, 24, runs her own business as a herbalist. The sisters live at home with their parents and three siblings in east London. The whole family is musical and supportive of their musical careers.

"My mum is from Guyana and my dad is Jamaican and, because of our African

heritage, rhythm is in our blood; my mother loves to sing," says Sakinah.

The Pearls play local council events and sacred music and interfaith music festivals where there's a market hungry for female singers.

"There's a huge Islamic entertainment scene and it's growing. We are our own niche because of the fact that we are women and there are so few women on the scene," says Rabiah.

Unlike other acts on the Islamic entertainment scene, the Pearls are not political or controversial in their songs. They prefer to sing about their love of their religion, and spread the message about peaceful Islam.

"All our songs are about love," says Sakinah. "We could sing about forced marriages and injustices that go on around us inside and outside of Islam, but really we are a bit hippy and just sing about love and peace. Those issues are important and other people do sing about them but Islam has another side away from the controversy and politics. No one was representing the spiritual side of Islam so we sing about that.

"Islam is beautiful and our experience of Islam is about a peaceful and spiritual journey."

The Pearls have sparked debate on the internet, with some insisting that what they are doing is forbidden, or haram.

"We have had people arguing online and saying what we are doing is haram and that we'll go to hell," says Rabiah. "To hear that is quite hard when I see what we do as a form of worship. It's upsetting when someone tells you that you'll go to hell. We are not scholars and we are not going to pretend that we are. But we really feel we are spreading an important message about our religion.

"When the media talks about Islamic extremism, it brings tears to my eyes and I get