Only three miles separate Laila Abed Rabho’s home from Jerusalem’s Hebrew University, but she had to travel an extraordinary distance to get there. Abed Rabho, 55, aspired to be a schoolteacher, but the loss of her eyesight changed the course of her life, forcing her to set new goals and reinvent herself. Today, a leading expert on women’s rights in Muslim law, her groundbreaking research at the university has shed new light on the status of women in Islam.

The challenges Abed Rabho has overcome are formidable: The daughter of an illiterate mother, she earned a Ph.D. degree; an Arabic-speaker who began studying the Hebrew language only in adulthood, she wrote her thesis in Hebrew; she is blind; a Muslim at an Israeli institution; and a feminist woman researcher studying the conservative, male-dominated environment of the Islamic legal system.

And while her handicap has undoubtedly limited her options, Abed Rabho discovered one possible advantage: In the hundreds of interviews she conducted with Muslim women seeking recourse from the Sharia (Muslim law) courts, she demonstrated a gift for getting them to open up. “Since I am blind, I am perceived as less of a threat than a sighted woman,” said Abed Rabho in an interview at her office at the Harry S. Truman Institute for the Advancement of Peace at Hebrew University. “The women I interviewed may have believed that I could not identify them again, and their secrets were safe with me.”

Breaking away from an academic tradition of research based on written documents, Abed Rabho asked the women at Sharia courts in Jerusalem and Taibe to talk about themselves, what had brought them to the court and what results they had achieved. The wealth of information she collected amazed her colleagues. Abed Rabho’s material provided a rare glimpse into the women’s private lives and place in society.

“No body even cared what these women said before. We were astonished by the kind of things they told her,” said Professor Ruth Roded, Abed Rabho’s Ph.D. adviser and one of the first researchers to study women in Islam.

Astute yet soft-spoken, with long jet-black hair framing her fine features, Abed Rabho tells her story without sentimentality. The third of seven children, she was born in 1957 in the village of Beit Safafa on the southern edge of Jerusalem, on the Jordanian side of the village divided at the end of the 1948 war. The family’s home remained on the Israeli side and they officially became refugees. The Abed Rabhos lived in a series of rented apartments until her father built a new house in 1962. After the Six-Day War in 1967, Israel incorporated the whole village into Jerusalem, but the family’s original house, converted into an Israeli police station, was never recovered.

Even after the village came under Israeli rule, Abed Rabho continued to go to primary and junior high schools run by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees. She attended a girls’ high school in
Bethlehem and went on to a women’s teacher-training college in Ramallah, where she studied to become a science and math teacher.

During summer vacation after her second year of college, Abed Rabho began losing her eyesight. She was diagnosed with retinal detachment and hospitalized at the St. John of Jerusalem Eye Hospital, where she under-

went numerous surgeries, to no avail. “I went into the hospital seeing and came out blind,” she said simply.

“But thank God I had good parents,” she said. “My mother didn’t know how to read or write but she knew how to take care of me and so did my father.” They took her to the Helen Keller Institute in Bethlehem to learn Braille. “Within two months, I learned how to read it in Arabic and English but I didn’t know Hebrew yet.”

Then she returned to school, only to be told that she had to change her subject because the science labs would now be too difficult for her to perform. She was retrained to teach primary school and graduated with honors, but schools did not want to hire a blind teacher who could not use the blackboard. “I was mad,” she said. “I had earned my diploma, I was a teacher, but what was I going to do now? I did not have a job.”

In an effort to become employable, Abed Rabho went to Birzeit University and earned a bachelor’s degree in Middle Eastern history. But even with her degree in hand, Abed Rabho was unemployed for a year until she was hired by a center for the blind, where she taught older women with little education. She worked there for seven years but felt frustrated and overqualified.

At this point a colleague suggested she go for a master’s degree at Hebrew University. “I didn’t know the Hebrew University took Arab students from East Jerusalem,” said Abed Rabho. By now in her thirties, she began learning Hebrew and was accepted into a program in Islamic studies.

Roded thought fieldwork would be a good way to accommodate Abed Rabho’s blindness while also taking advantage of her being a Muslim woman. Under Israeli law, all matters of marriage and divorce are governed by religious law, and parallel to the civil courts are religious ones for the various recognized religions.

So Abed Rabho set out to talk to women.

Her findings were surprising: The courts were more attentive than expected to the plight of women suffering in their marriages and likely to find ways to help them within the constraints of Muslim law. In fact, many women told Abed Rabho that going to court had been empowering, giving them a sense of control rather than victimhood.

Abed Rabho discovered that many women asked for and were granted child support without getting divorced. They could demand their husbands provide them with separate housing if they were uncomfortable living with the husband’s family. She found that the main complaints were interference from the husband’s family, domestic violence and legal-status issues related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

“Laila asked the women what brought them to court and how they knew about their [religious] rights,” said Roded. “She got a lot more than the answer to those two questions… She’s sitting on a mass of material no-
ered was “certificate marriage”: Men from the occupied territories were marrying women from East Jerusalem or Israel to gain legal privileges and free passage in and out of Israel without a special permit.

The positive publicity of Abed Rabho’s work was not lost on the court administration. “I think she made a positive contribution because she presented the perspective of the Muslim women in the Sharia court that was never studied before,” said Iyad Zahalkeh, a judge in the Haifa Sharia court and former national head of the Sharia court system. “As opposed to prejudiced views that the courts discriminate against women, [Abed Rabho] presents the courts as places that defend women’s rights and protect women even against their families. She also helps inform women of their rights.”

Indeed, Abed Rabho has taken her expertise to the field: She qualified as a Sharia pleader, certified by Israel’s Supreme Court to represent women in Sharia courts; and she meets Muslim women’s groups all over the country to teach them about their rights.

Never married, Abed Rabho lives with her father, younger brother and his family; her mother passed away a year ago. Although she requires an assistant for her academic work, she is largely independent.

On a Thursday morning last summer, Abed Rabho left her house at 6 A.M. to address a group of housewives in northern Israel. She took a taxi to the Jerusalem bus depot, got a bus to Tel Aviv, switched to a bus to Hadera and was picked up and driven to the village of Jatt for the meeting. Then she repeated the whole process in reverse and got home at 5 P.M.

“Laila is one of the experts on women’s rights in Islam,” said Naefa Sarisi, director of the organization Women and Horizons, who hosted Abed Rabho in Jatt. She noted that the women who attended Abed Rabho’s class made an instant connection with her. “There are women here who don’t know their rights, they’re learning about them for the first time.”

Abed Rabho would like to open her own consulting business to help Muslim women, or perhaps partner with a law practice. For the meantime, she continues to do research and teach women about their rights within Sharia law.