Women in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, known as the “rape capital of the world,” are often portrayed in the media as tragic figures. Deace Namwera, a 28-year-old Congolese journalist, was tired of seeing the same clichéd stories and felt that female-oriented women like herself in the country’s emerging middle class were being overlooked. “Congolese women aren’t just victims of rape or economic hardship,” she says. “We are dynamic—we’re leaders, we’re friends, we’re mothers.”

Last March, Namwera founded MAMA Radio, the nation’s first radio station by and for women. While other local stations playumba tunes or discuss the latest football match, MAMA Radio has run segments on why it’s OK for women to wear pants and the challenges of being a military wife, and hosted a call-in show on birth-control options. The 23-person staff also solicits stories from non-journalists, women who, Namwera says, are told by society that they are to be seen, not heard. “It’s really important for women to tell their own stories,” she says. “We teach them how to do everything from holding a microphone to developing a narrative.”

“Can I divorce my husband if he’s having an affair?” “What are the rules about abortion?” “Can I play sports without wearing a hijab?” These are some of the questions posed by women calling in to the Middle East’s only “fatwa hotline”—a telephone help line staffed by Muslim female scholars aiming to educate women on their rights according to the genuine rules of Islam. The hotline, based in the United Arab Emirates and funded by the moderate UAE government, launched eight years ago, but it has seen a rapid increase in the number of callers in the past two years owing to the rise of jihadist groups such as Islamic State.

“There are many conflicting beliefs about what women can and cannot do due to religious hard-liners who want to restrict women’s freedoms,” says Rabia, one of four full-time, paid female Islamic experts who answer the hotline’s 200 calls per day.

The scholars listen to callers’ dilemmas and then issue fatwas, or religious rulings, to help them know what to do. “We give advice based on the direct teachings of the Prophet Muhammad, which are based on fairness to women, so they can avoid fear and confusion,” Radi explains. Many of the callers, who can choose to remain anonymous, are young women who want to pursue education and careers outside the home without violating the religious rules, while others call to ask about sex or other sensitive matters—questions they too are embarrassed to ask male religious leaders. “Nothing is taboo for us, because we understand women’s issues,” says Radi.

So, is it permissible for a woman to divorce a philandering husband? “It depends on the exact situation. Usually we don’t condone divorce,” she says. “But our basic message to Muslim women is that they often have much more power and freedom than they think.” —Ehab Hanenzer