

No Sharia Law in Britain

Maryam Namazie of the Council of ex-Muslims of Britain spoke against Sharia Law.

Sharia law is an important issue for people living in Britain, as well as across the world. To highlight it, I want to start with a case that I have been working on these past few weeks. It's the case of Sakineh Mohammadi Ashtiani. She's a mother of two who is facing death by stoning in Iran for 'adultery.' Under Sharia law, the penalty for adultery is death by stoning. Women are buried up to their chests, men up to their waists and the law even specifies the size of the stone to be used in the stoning. Sakineh was due to be executed by stoning a few weeks ago. When there was no legal recourse remaining, her 22-year-old son, Sajjad, wrote an open letter, together with his 17-year-old sister, saying their mother was going to be stoned to death at any time and calling on the people of the world to intervene and step in to try to save her life. And that is exactly what people have done everywhere: nearly half a million people have signed petitions on her behalf and International Sakineh Day on 24th July saw rallies and protests in over 30 cities across the world. On 28th August, we are now organising 100 cities against stoning.

As a result of the public outcry, the Islamic regime in Iran has now said that they never intended to stone her. The Embassy here in London said it as a public relations move. They often do this, saying they are not intending to kill someone and then go ahead and do it in the dark and within prison walls. We are concerned that even if she is not stoned to death, she will be executed and, obviously, in my opinion execution is wrong under all circumstances, and stoning in particular is especially barbaric and brutal. But it is important to keep the pressure on, and the pressure is working – the fact that she is still alive

means that it works. The fact that her son went to see her a few days ago and she said that for the first time she had hope as a result of all the people who had come out in her defence shows that it makes a difference and it has an impact. I am here to ask you also to step in and intervene on her behalf; I'm sure many of you have already done that. Her lawyer is in hiding now, he has been interrogated, his wife and his brother-in-law have been arrested. Her son has been called for interrogation a number of times to ask why and how this international campaign has taken the scope that it has, how her picture got out to the public and so on and so forth.

Now, when we are talking about Sharia law in Britain, I am often told to not speak of stoning and amputations; Iran amputated the limbs of five people just last week. I am told not to talk about those

who are being hung by cranes in city centres for 'acts incompatible with chastity' or the fact that being gay is an executable offence in Iran. In fact, there are 130 offences punishable by death under Sharia law, including apostasy, blasphemy, heresy and so on.

In my opinion, when speaking of Sharia law it is important to speak of stonings and amputations as that is what the criminal code of Sharia law is. Islamists and proponents of Sharia law like the Archbishop of Canterbury try to separate the two in order to give it a more palatable appearance for Western public opinion. The reality, however, is that Sharia's criminal code is an extension of its civil code. It is the same code of law. Of course, death by stoning is not the same as denying a woman the right to divorce and child custody, but the misogyny behind a law that stones a woman to



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death is the same one that denies her rights in the family.

Whilst it is predominantly the civil code being implemented in Britain, in countries under Islamic laws, Sharia law's civil code is one the pillars of women's oppression as it is fast becoming here. Under Sharia's civil code, a woman's testimony is worth half that of a man's; women do not have unilateral right to divorce whereas men do; girls and wives get half the inheritance of men and boys. A woman is not even allowed to sign her own marriage contract, a male guardian has to sign it on her behalf. These are the civil aspects of Sharia law.

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How offensive that these would be deemed the 'more palatable aspects' of the law. No hands are being cut off, as human rights campaigner Gita Sahgal has said, so it doesn't seem to matter. In fact, it is nothing short of scandalous that these laws should be applied to a large number of our citizens in this country or for that matter anywhere else.

Sharia councils and Muslim Arbitration Tribunals decide on the majority of rulings in this country – Sharia councils according to their own statistics have already dealt with over 7000 cases denying women the right to divorce, the right to child custody and more. One Law for All has recently published a report called 'Sharia Law in Britain: A Threat to One Law for All and Equal Rights,' which finds that Sharia courts are discriminatory and should be banned because they contradict UK law, public policy and human rights.

I will give you some examples of how that happens in the area of child custody. Under British law – well, I know there is no such thing as British law, but under English law or Welsh law, or ... the welfare of the child is paramount. Under Sharia law, custody of the child goes to the father at a pre-set age, irrespective of the welfare of the child. So, even if the mother has fled a violent situation, even if the father is deemed to be

abusive, nonetheless the child will go to the father at a pre-set age, and this has been happening in Britain. So we have cases where Sharia councils (which are not even acting as arbitration tribunals – they are charities) have set up courts and denied women the right to child custody and given the child to the father at a pre-set age. And we've got cases, for example, of people who have come to us and said: 'We've gone to a British court and we've got a fatwa against us from the Sharia council, saying that we have to be boycotted because we have dared to go to a British court rather than to the Sharia council.' So there are threats and intimidation around these sorts of courts and councils as well, and people's rights are being denied as a result.

I think the main argument in support of these councils is that people go there 'voluntarily' and our response is that it's not voluntary for many people because of the pressure and threats and intimidations involved. I mentioned the case where someone received an expulsion order for daring to go to a British court instead of a Sharia Council. But there are a number of studies, which we also mention in our report, where, for example, there is evidence of threats and intimidations. There is one study in which the author sat in on ten cases in the Sharia council.

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Four of the women actually had injunctions against their husbands for threatening behaviour. So the husband was not even meant to be in the same room with his wife or former wife; he was using the council as a way of renegotiating child custody issues, divorce settlement issues and so on. In a sense, women living in Britain have the same lack of rights as women living under Islamic laws, in large part because of Islamism's influence here and elsewhere. The threats and intimidations that people face are very real.

The other argument that's often given in

support of these councils is: ‘Well, if women are not happy with them, they can always go to a British court,’ but again it’s not that simple, given the pressures that are involved. There are a lot of people whose rights are violated, who are dissatisfied with the results of the councils, but who dare not go to a British court. What we are actually doing by allowing these courts to endure and expand is to leave larger and larger numbers of people at the mercy of these courts.

I want to make two final points. One of the arguments in support of these sorts of courts is that people have a right to their religion; in my opinion it is a mistake to think that this has anything to do with people’s right to religion. This is the right of

Islamism to repress and restrict citizens in this country and across the world; it is a demand of the political Islamic movement, not a demand of Muslims. Now, if you have come to any of our rallies, we’ve had Muslim women come and speak and say: ‘None of us had to go to

Sharia councils 30 years ago. It wasn’t a thing we had to do; now we have to do it.’ And you have someone like the Muslim woman councillor from Tower Hamlets, Shiria Khatun, who gets death threats for not being veiled, saying: there is more pressure to be veiled in Tower Hamlets than in Bangladesh. What we need to understand is that this is very much the result of the rise of the Islamic movement: why there are more burqas on the streets of London, why there are more Sharia courts. Saying that this is people’s right to religion is leaving large numbers of our citizens, not just British citizens, but world citizens, at the mercy of a brutal, misogynist, inhuman, mediaeval movement that will stone people to death in the twenty-first century, if given the chance, and will deny women rights in the family in Britain, if given the chance. And is doing that. And I think it



Woman stoned to death for adultery

is important to stand up and be heard and push back this movement. Not just because it is important to push back Islamism, but because it’s important to defend people’s rights, equal rights, women’s rights, human rights. These things that have been fought for are not Western concepts but universal concepts that are the demand of people living in a small village in Iraq or Afghanistan as well as those living in a metropolitan city in Britain or Iran.

Finally, I would like to say that rights, equality, respect: these are things that have been raised by progressive social movements vis-à-vis human beings, not religions, beliefs and reactionary political movements. I think the more we give

rights to these political movements, to religion and belief to do whatever it wants, irrespective of the consequences on people’s lives, we restrict the space for real live human beings, we deny people rights and we deny them the freedoms that they deserve. So, I think the battle to oppose Sharia

law in this country is a battle across the world; it is a battle in defence of secularism, in defence of universal values and in defence of a life that is really worthy of the twenty-first century.

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For more information on One Law for All and to sign the petition, volunteer or purchase the report, visit its website: <http://www.onelawforall.org.uk/>
You can also read the full report on Sharia Law in Britain here: <http://www.onelawforall.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/New-Report-Sharia-Law-in-Britain.pdf>.

This is an edited version of her talk given to the SOF Conference in Leicester. Talk recorded and transcribed by Oliver Essame.