

'EQUALITY BEFORE THE LAW' IS NOT JUST AN EMPTY PHRASE

On the Law Society's Discriminatory Sharia Guidance
Interview with Pragna Patel

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'EQUALITY BEFORE THE LAW' IS NOT JUST AN EMPTY PHRASE

ON THE LAW SOCIETY'S DISCRIMINATORY GUIDANCE ON SHARIA-COMPLIANT INHERITANCE AND WILLS

Interview with Pragna Patel

Maryam Namazie: British law already allows people to leave their estates to whomever they choose so why does a [statement](#) signed by a number of groups and individuals label the Law Society's guidance on Sharia-compliant inheritance and wills discriminatory?

Pragna Patel: The practice note (guidelines) issued by the Law Society is extremely problematic because what it seeks to do is to institutionalise a profoundly discriminatory approach to the question of property settlements, disputes and trusts concerning women and children in minority communities. It is at best a misguided response but nevertheless dangerous, because it is yet another way of reflecting the growing view that civil matters and disputes in minority communities are to be addressed within a religious framework.

The practice notes states: 'This is the first time guidance has been published for solicitors to assist them with the intricacies of Sharia succession rules, which is the code of law derived from the Quran and from the teachings and examples of Mohammed'.

"The role of the Law Society is to promote legal professional standards so that the law is upheld in a fair and non-discriminatory way."



The immediate question that needs to be asked is why does the Law Society not leave it to clerics to clarify the 'intricacies' of 'Sharia' rules outside the law for those who want it? How can it possibly think that its role is to guide on religious matters? More importantly, why does the Law Society feel that it needs to support and be seen to publicly support the drawing up of discriminatory wills? Quite apart from the fact that it cannot possibly know what is and isn't 'Sharia compliant' given the many contested interpretations of so called 'Sharia' law, it actually wades into religious territory and gives succour to the view that religious and secular laws can operate in parallel with the former applying to minorities and the latter to the white majority society.

The role of the Law Society is to promote legal professional standards so that the law is upheld in a fair and non-discriminatory way. The phrase 'equality before the law' is not just an empty phrase. Justice must not only be done but seen to be done. The law is symbolic and aspirational at the same time; it is an important means by which just and democratic societal norms are established. The Law Society has

no business in normalising 'Sharia' principles in British legal culture. The Law Society also has no business in endorsing and promoting discriminatory religious norms and values for minorities because in doing so, it enhances profoundly patriarchal and unequal social arrangements in minority communities.

Maryam Namazie: *If it's not binding, how can it seriously undermine the Equality Act, citizenship rights and one law for all?*

Pragna Patel: Those who argue that it is 'not binding' and that it is 'all a fuss about nothing', miss the point entirely. The

guidance signals the view that no matter how discriminatory and abhorrent certain aspects of minority cultures may be, they must be tolerated and even supported! We cannot underestimate the ways in which religion is creeping into the very fabric of legal structures in our society and it is minority women and other vulnerable sub groups who pay the price. By issuing such guidance, the Law Society is helping to create a context that is conducive to the practice of patriarchal oppression and to the legitimisation of anti-human rights religious norms. Religious norms dictate strict gender roles and codes of conduct for women - codes that deny their right to freedom and equality in the family in a range of matters such as marriage, divorce, children and inheritance.

I have noted that the religious-Right (who have been in the ascendancy in our communities since the 90s) have been quietly going about trying to create a parallel legal system in the UK. By engaging in a pincer-like manoeuvre, they have on the one hand, obtained official endorsement for the establishment and operation of alternative religious forums for dispute resolutions on family matters, such as Sharia councils and tribunals, and on the other hand, they have influenced the legal system from the inside by demanding 'Sharia compliant' approaches to civil and especially family matters. The Law Society's response is an example of the latter category.



Credit: The Economist

The guidelines remind solicitors that under 'Sharia' '... as a general rule, a male heir will inherit twice the amount that a female heir will receive, Illegitimate children are not heirs'. This is really extraordinary since it accepts without question, the inherent discrimination that exists in Islam (as indeed in other religions) against women and children born outside marriage. What happened to the ideals of justice, equality and fairness embodied in the law? Far from promoting equality and justice, by its action, the Law Society is helping to arrest the development of justice born out of struggles for equality by women in minority communities. It is one thing to recognise that discrimination exists in all societies, but quite another

for the Law Society to be associated with and be seen to promote relativism to questions of equality and justice. The demand for recognition of separate religious or 'personal' laws to address family matters are gaining momentum, but it has serious and even life threatening implications for minority women and children and other minority sub-groups.

Maryam Namazie: *According to some groups like the British Humanist Association (BHA), the issue has been blown out of proportion. According to them, the Law Society issued the guidance responding to requests from its solicitors. It is purely 'guidance' – the document states*

'Practice notes are not legal advice, nor do they necessarily provide a defence to complaints of misconduct or of inadequate professional service'. It's just advice so that solicitors can provide a service to (Sunni) Muslim clients who want a will that fits with their beliefs. It does not claim to do any more than that. Your response?

Pragna Patel: The BHA would say that wouldn't they, given that they have led 'what's all the fuss about' chants? I come back to the point: what is the Law Society, a public body that should be preoccupied with upholding good practice and the ideals of justice and equality, doing wading into religious matters and producing guidance on how to draft wills that are 'Sharia compliant'? The guidelines are deeply offensive to anyone committed to equality and non discrimination. The Law Society's role is to encourage their members to be compliant on human rights and

equality grounds; to foster a culture of human rights that is based on principles of non-divisibility and universality, not to endorse and promote discrimination towards Muslim women and children. This is nothing short of inverse racism. I don't see the Law Society putting out guidance for those in the wider society who wish to be 'Bible compliant' for instance! So why the need to prove their anti-racist credentials in a way that is so dangerous for minority women and children and to the very ideas of equality and justice?

The Law Society's guidance amounts to nothing less than state sponsored discrimination. It has effectively aligned itself with patriarchal and profoundly misogynist forces in our communities that seek to ensure that minority women stay second class citizens. What a blow to all those Muslim women and men who struggle for their human rights and to all those who want to encourage their daughters to consider themselves as equals to men.

Maryam Namazie: *Isn't this just another example of whipping up hysteria against Muslims or a xenophobic response to Islam as some would say? After all there is a far-Right that uses the issue of Sharia law to scapegoat and attack Muslims and immigrants. It's not the law, it's not binding, so it is just another attempt at scapegoating Muslims and raising the Sharia bogeyman?*

Pragna Patel: It is easy to label any and every criticism of practices within Muslim populations as just another example of 'hysteria against Muslims' and 'Islamophobic'. I am really getting bored with these accusations because they do not really seek to debate the matter – in this case the separation of religion and

neo colonialism and racism as many on the religious-Right and political Left do. Those who argue that the furore by feminists is simply yet another attack on Muslims are the same people who also deny or downplay the practice of for example, FGM, honour based violence, forced marriage, polygamy, child sexual abuse, amongst others, or deny that they are manifestations of women's inequality propped up by culture and religion. Similar accusations were hurled at us when the question of gender segregation in universities came up. It seems that we can never talk about these things because we live in minority communities. Well, Southall Black Sisters (SBS) has long bucked the tendency to silence us in this way. Indeed from our very inception in 1979, we signalled the view that challenging racism could not be at the expense of challenging women's inequality and oppression, even if that fuelled racism. However inconvenient these truths are, we have a moral, legal and political responsibility to talk about them even if it leads to the demonization of minority communities. Instead, what we must do is wage the struggle against inequality and racism simultaneously.

Maryam Namazie: *Islamic feminists would say that there are feminist interpretations of inheritance in Sharia and so the problem is not Sharia in and of itself. Your thoughts?*

Pragna Patel: This is also another excuse that is often heard. It is regularly trotted out whenever the knotty problems of harmful practices and gender inequality in our communities are raised. We are constantly told, including by so called feminists, that the problem is not religion per se but the malfunctioning cultures in which religion is practised. The argument goes that if people only knew and

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the law - but to shut down debate. Discriminatory and harmful practices in our communities cannot be swept under the carpet just because we are a minority and they cannot be talked about as if they are products of

understood the 'true essence' of their religion and had the 'correct' interpretation, these problems and would not occur. The problem with this argument is that it denies the fact that religion is always mediated

through economic, social and cultural processes and that in practice religion and culture are enmeshed in structures that perpetuate all kinds of power relations. So, the use of religion in regulating human conduct is not an abstract matter of debate but one that has life changing and life threatening consequences for those who have no control over their lives.

This kind of argument leads to contestations between different interpretations of religion, each vying to be the 'true' and 'authentic' version of religion. But when all is said and done, what we are left with is religious essentialism in which all difference and dissent from any kind of orthodoxy is obliterated. There are as many interpretations of religion as there are people, so who gets to decide what is the correct interpretation? Those who decide are those who have institutional power over others, especially women and sexual minorities. At this moment, the Islamic-Right, often masquerading as moderates, now entirely dominate and control the interpretation of Muslim identity and laws, often by subverting the concepts of human rights. This is also happening in other religions.

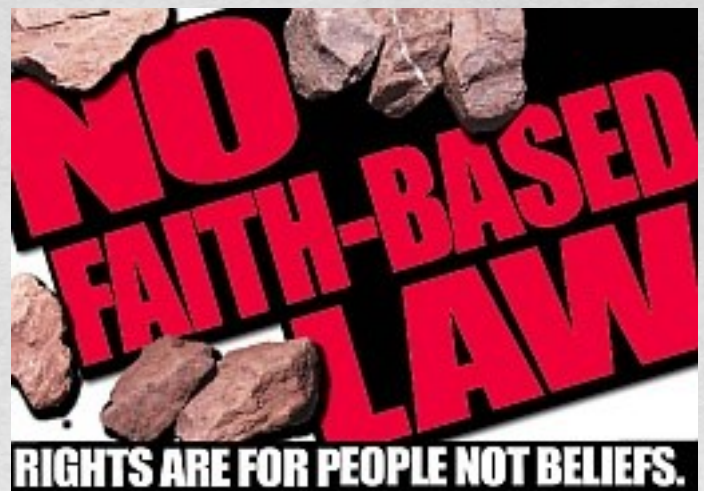
The Law Society's practice guidelines tell those drawing up wills to remember that 'as a general rule a male heir will inherit twice the amount that a female heir will receive...' So how did it decide that this was the definitive version of Sharia on wills?

That's one problem with this line of argument but the other problem is that at some point, arguing from within a religious perspective, no matter how liberal, is bound to hit a wall, especially when it comes to 'wedge' issues, like sexuality and reproductive rights. All religions are pretty clear about these issues, so no matter how it is interpreted, no religion is going to endorse sexual autonomy or the right of women to control their bodies. You can't change core fundamentals of religion and those are inherently discriminatory against women and others. I think you rightly pointed out that whilst 'Sharia' can be applied in divergent ways, there is consensus within the Muslim schools of thought on the following: the death penalty for apostasy and "sexual crimes" which includes homosexuality and adultery; a penal code based on retribution; on the obligation for women to veil; and in the ordering of men/women and Muslims/non-Muslims according to unequal status before the law.

I think that feminist interpretations of religion can be a useful tactic in certain, limited contexts, especially where secular spaces have completely shut down, but

here in the UK, it is dangerous to insist on liberal or feminist interpretations from a religious perspective because this kind of argument is used to undermine the secular spaces that we have struggled to create. The greatest danger posed by this kind of argument as I see it, is that it de-legitimises the view that secularism is a feminist issue for minority women.

Maryam Namazie: *How does the guidance unwittingly aid Islamist attempts at subverting democratic laws and principles with a de facto parallel legal system where minority women and children have increasingly fewer rights than other citizens? Where does the Islamist movement come into all this since so far it is mainly portrayed as a personal matter for Muslims?*



Pragna Patel: As I have said, the guidance clearly subverts the protection, equality and justice principles in our society in respect of women's rights. To this end, it serves to further the political Islamist agenda. Fundamentalist Muslims and others from minority religions have been campaigning for many years for the State to incorporate aspects of religious or personal laws into the legal system.

In the last ten years or so, the UK has seen a rise in the demand for parallel legal systems, emanating especially but not only from some powerful Muslim organisations that have campaigned for the right to be governed by Sharia laws in family matters. This demand can be directly linked to the growth of political Islam and more generally to the rise of fundamentalism in all religions. The State has aided and abetted fundamentalist demands for parallel legal systems by strengthening the 'faith-based' approach to minorities through government policies on preventing violent extremism, cohesion and now the Big Society and localism agenda. Fundamentalists and religionists alike have also benefitted from the austerity measures which have lessened access to

justice for vulnerable groups. Religious or so called faith-based organisations have been empowered to shape and direct public policy and the law on a range of social and welfare issues. In the current situation, for example, both the Jewish Beth Dins and the Muslim Arbitration Tribunals are making use of the Arbitration Act 1996 to formally pronounce religious judgements in areas of family, children (residence/access/custody) and inheritance cases, although they are not supposed to. This has become an ever more pressing issue in the context of legal aid cuts. We see the effects of these cuts in our daily work with abused women at SBS and it is truly frightening because the final safety net provided by the welfare and legal system is literally being taken away from under their feet. Make no mistake: a social contract has developed between the State and authoritarian if not fundamentalist religionists. The latter have capitalised by entering the field of the law and education in particular, with the aim of producing new forms of morality as is evident in the ways in which the Law Society has behaved.

Maryam Namazie: *Where do you think people should stand on the issue of Sharia law in general and in Britain in particular?*

Pragna Patel: Clearly they must stand with us in opposing these profoundly worrying developments. It must be emphasised that marriage/divorce, family, child custody and inheritance issues are not private matters but rather matters in which State regulation and legal protections are central to delivering women's and children's equality and human rights. The suggestion that issues to do with the family should be the subject of arbitrary and culturally relative processes is flawed. We believe that to see them in this way is to undo the decades of feminist input into the development and extension of law and public policy to cover domestic and family issues. We believe the State does have an important role to play. In particular the State has a responsibility to safeguard the interests of the vulnerable, of women and children and to protect them from violence and

abuse. This does not encroach on an individual's rights to conduct their relationships as they choose but the question of entitlements and rights when that relationship breaks down or comes to an end and especially if there are violations, is most definitely a matter of public concern and carries with it a role for the State. This responsibility must not be abrogated by creating and validating spaces to be governed by religious laws. State backing of religious norms and arbitration systems directly contradicts and flouts equality laws and the Human Rights Act 1998 in the UK. Moreover it contravenes international human rights law. More specifically, the State's obligations to act with due diligence; and to ensure gender non-discrimination under Article 16 of the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, and Resolution 1464 of the European Council on women and religion, which stipulates that member States must guarantee the separation between the Church and the State in order to ensure that women are not subjected to religiously inspired policies and laws (for example, in the area of family, divorce, and abortion law).

The development of parallel legal systems signals the view that it is legitimate for minority communities to operate a second-rate justice system based as it is on unaccountable and partial mechanisms of conflict resolution! This in itself is a racist response to demands for equality and justice, especially in view of the fact that even in countries where State-sanctioned religious laws operate, there are substantial movements, often led by women and human rights activists, for their repeal on the grounds that they are not compatible with universal human rights principles.

It is worth reiterating that if religious arbitration tribunals in relation to family matters are allowed to operate for different communities, they will inevitably dilute the process by which human rights are asserted within society as a whole, thus preventing a culture of human rights from taking root, let alone progressing in society.

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Maryam Namazie: Does the difference in attitude to such rules surprise you? In the sense that it is highly contested in many places where Sharia is the law, and tolerated and even promoted in a place like Britain?

Pragna Patel: No it doesn't surprise me although it greatly depresses me. As black and minority women struggling for rights in the UK, we are knee deep in dangerous waters and really swimming against the tide. It doesn't appear to matter that elsewhere in the world, the implementation of 'Sharia' laws is a highly contested matter and that struggles for democracy and human rights are taking place all the time everywhere. It doesn't even make a difference that in asylum and immigration law in the UK itself, 'Sharia' law has been regarded as highly discriminatory and incompatible with human rights by the courts when determining cases of women fleeing gender persecution from other parts of the world. Yet, public bodies like the Universities UK and now the Law Society are falling over themselves in an attempt to appease the religious-Right whose agenda is to create a parallel legal system.

As feminists, we seek the equal rights of all to one universal legal system. We believe the debate about religious laws should be firmly located within a debate about human rights and safeguarding equalities and not within a politics of identity and cultural and religious relativism.

Religious arbitration encourages public bodies like the Law Society to defer decision-making in respect of women and family matters to the religious tribunals and authorities for the sake of expediency and out of fear of being labelled 'racist' or 'Islamophobic'. Moreover, in response to the allegation that a system of universal human rights curtails other rights such as the ability to exercise freedom of religion and belief, it is important to remember the right to religion and belief is not an absolute right, it is a qualified right, to be restricted where it is justified in the public interest. The present legal system may be imperfect but it offers one important safeguard: that the right to manifest religion cannot trump other more fundamental human rights such as the right to life; the right not to be subjected to inhuman and degrading treatment, the right to family life, and the right to non-discrimination on the basis of gender.

Maryam Namazie: How do we further the coalition fighting against Sharia compliant rules in the family or

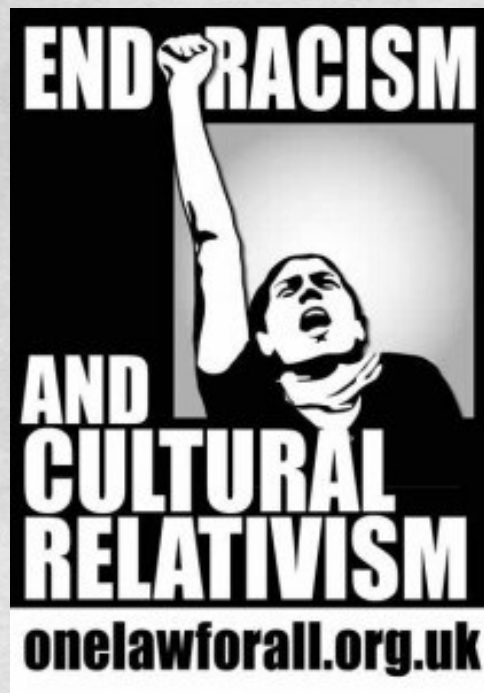
inheritance when the far-Right uses this issue, the pro-Islamist Left defends Sharia over the rights of women and some Muslim feminists stress Islamic interpretations rather than the necessity for secularism? Where can progressive forces meet to move the campaign against discriminatory religious laws forward?

Pragna Patel: This is the critical question and one for which there are no easy answers. At present, we are witness to this unholy alliance between the religious-Right and the far Left who are in bed together. And then we have the problem of some Muslim feminists asserting the right to be 'Muslim feminists' which means that they think they can win the struggle for equality by re-interpreting religious

texts. I am not sure where we seek allies because our natural allies, many so called feminists and those on the Left have deserted us. I have often said that ours is a very lonely struggle because in this current political climate, we can no longer be sure of our allies. I guess we have to keep on struggling and reaching out and seeking alliances from wherever we can. But we must be careful that the alliances we create are not uncritical or forged out of political expediency. We cannot enter into uncritical alliances with those who wish to use these issues to whip up racism or argue that feminism and secularism are 'western' ideals to which minorities have contributed nothing. Instead, they must be

forged in a way that enhances our ethical positions based on the principles of justice, democracy, secularism, equality and human rights.

I am always so heartened by the views of the women from all religious backgrounds who come to SBS for instance, seeking support in the face of all kinds of horrors and violence. Even though they are acutely marginalised and face the full brunt of gender discriminatory practices and racism, they are often so clear in their vision of what constitutes a just and fair society. They really help to prevent our politics from losing its moral compass. We need to do more to build solidarity amongst women in our communities rather than look to the usual suspects. The one thing that prevents us from sliding into post modern cultural relativism and regressive identity politics is their demand that we separate the law from religion which they regard as a personal matter and not the basis for the assertion of their rights.



newsflash

AGHANISTAN

Mariam Koofi, a woman Afghan Member of Parliament was [shot and wounded](#) in the capital Kabul after an argument with a member of the security forces, who was later arrested. Her injury was reportedly not life-threatening.

IRAN

A convicted prisoner in Iran has been saved from public execution at the last possible moment, after the family of the victim decided to spare his life. Balal Abdullah, now in his 20s, was found guilty of murdering Abdollah Hosseinzadeh during a fight in the street seven years ago when they were both 17. According to the “eye for an eye” ruling of qisas, the

fate, Abdollah’s mother slapped Balal’s face and then signalled her forgiveness. The victim’s father then removed the noose. This has stoked [campaign against executions](#) in Iran.



According to an [article](#) in **Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking**, the daily use of Facebook

has been associated with the desire to go without wearing the Hijab, noting a higher willingness to display pictures of themselves without a veil. “The Influence of Social Networking Technologies on Female Religious Veil-Wearing Behavior in Iran,” was composed from the results of a small survey of Iranian women. The data was taken from a random sampling of nongovernmental participants. Controlling for age and education, the researchers found a significant relationship between the amounts of time spent on



ISNA

PHOTO: ARASH KHAMOOSHI

sharia law of retribution, the victim’s family were to take an active role in the punishment of their son’s killer – it was expected that they would push away the chair on which he stood. Screaming for his life, Balal was dragged out to the gallows by officials and had his head placed in the noose. Yet instead of sealing his

Facebook to how likely the women surveyed were to cover themselves with a veil and whether they would post unveiled photos.

Medical schools in Iran will [restrict admission to women](#) in the coming academic year. The number of



women in the medical field has risen from 42 percent of total admissions in 1992 to 68 percent in the last year. The minister of health was quoted saying the declining number of men graduating from medical and nursing schools is creating a shortage of medical personnel prepared to be sent to remote areas and that it was necessary to move toward admitting a greater number of men into this field.

A British-Iranian woman has been [locked up in Iran for five months](#) after posting derogatory comments about the country's government on Facebook and fears she will be executed, her husband has said. Concerns are growing for the welfare of Roya Saberi Negad Nobakht, 47, from Stockport, who has been charged with "insulting Islamic sanctities", a

crime which can be punishable by death. She has been charged with "gathering and participation with intent to commit crime against national security" and "insulting Islamic sanctities". Her husband states that his wife's arrest was over comments she had made on a Facebook group about the government being "too Islamic", and that she had only been charged after a confession was extracted from her "under duress".

IRAQ

On April 30, the Iraqi parliament is expected to pass [new marital rules](#) for its majority Shia community with a law criticised by human rights activists as "legalised inequality". Under the new legislation, children in Iraq could be legally married before the age of nine. The new law would also prevent women from leaving the house without their husband's consent, automatically grant custody of children older than two to their father in divorce cases, and prevent Muslim men from marrying non-Muslims. Marital rape is also condoned by a clause that states women must comply with their husband's sexual demands. Men are given guardianship rights over women, and the law establishes rules governing polygamous relationships. Current Iraqi law sets the legal age for marriage at 18 without parental approval and states girls as young as 15 can be married only with a guardian's approval.



Image credit: Getty

NIGERIA

The fate of 115 female students [abducted](#) by Islamists was thrown into uncertainty when their school principal denied the Nigerian military's report that almost all the pupils had been freed. She said only 14 of the 129 girls and young women kidnapped by gunmen have returned to Chibok town — four who jumped from the back of a truck and 10 who escaped into the bush when their abductors asked them to cook a meal. Kwambura said the students were kidnapped because of a terrible mistake. She said the insurgents arrived after midnight at her Government Girls' Secondary School wearing military fatigues and posing as soldiers — a common tactic used by the insurgents. She said she believed them when they told her that they needed to move the girls for their own safety. So she allowed the extremists posing as soldiers to load the students on to the back of a truck. It was only as the armed men were leaving, and started shooting, that she realized her mistake. The militants killed a soldier and a police officer guarding the school.

SAUDI ARABIA

Saudi Arabian conservatives have [staged](#) a rare protest outside the Royal Court in Riyadh against "Westernising" reforms including moves to allow physical education for schoolgirls. Last week the consultative Shoura Council decided to urge the government to look into allowing sports classes for girls in state schools. Some powerful clerics, conservatives and their supporters fear the kingdom is losing its Islamic values in favour of Western ideas. In Saudi Arabia, women are banned from driving and must gain the approval of a male "guardian" to work, open a bank account, travel abroad or even to undergo some forms of voluntary surgery.

Restaurants and coffee shops in Jeddah have put up [signs](#) saying women should have "mahrams" (male guardians) to order shisha, and anyone who orders a shisha should be above 18 as per the order from the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and

Prevention of Vice (Haia). The move has elicited sharp reactions from Saudi women.

TUNISIA

After more than two years of arguments and concessions between Islamic and secular parties, on January 26, the Tunisian National Constituent Assembly ratified the country's new [Constitution](#) that includes a commitment to gender equality. Article 45



Tunisian message reads When everything becomes small, women remain strong

of the Tunisian Constitution guarantees "equality of opportunities between women and men to have access to all levels of responsibility and in all domains" and Article 46 seeks parity "between men and women in elected assemblies". In an interview for UN Women, Sana Ben Achour, women's rights activist, explained that the Tunisian Constitution is the first one in the Arab world to ensure equal access to the presidency. Additionally, Article 20 states: "All male and female citizens have the same rights and duties. They are equal before the law without discrimination". In August 2012, the Islamist party Ennahda—which won the country's elections in October 2011—proposed a Constitution that would have granted women a "complementary role inside the family." Shortly after the draft was made public, protests shook the capital. Women's rights supporters marched down Habib Bourguiba boulevard in Tunis chanting, "We rebelled together, we will build Tunisia together." The Islamist party took a step back explaining that they had no intention of stripping women of their rights.

arts corner

Collection of Iranian photography at the Fine Arts Gallery at Cal State Los Angeles

According to a report on a collection of Iranian photography at the Fine Arts Gallery at Cal State Los Angeles:

“When you're an artist in Iran, you live a harsh reality.



Like Every Day - commentary on the daily tasks that women are consigned to and defined by in Iranian culture .
Shadi Ghadirian

“Make a politically subversive sculpture and you're censored. Create a painting that challenges religious norms and you're censored.

“But a new art exhibition showcases how Iranian photographers are able to create images into social and political commentary that fly under the radar. ‘The government of Iran is a religious theocratic government. And therefore it controls every facet of creativity in Iran’, says Abbas Daneshvari, curator of a collection of Iranian photography opening this Saturday at the Fine Arts Gallery at Cal State Los Angeles. ‘[But artists] have arrived at the point that



Party- addresses issues of identity within a culture.
Amir Ali Ghasemi

they can express themselves in symbolic and metaphoric terms wherein it's rather difficult to decipher their messages’.

“For example, ‘Untitled’ is a photo collage of two men who look like they're locked in a bloody fight.



However, one could also say they're drawn together in a passionate embrace. The image is by Sadegh Tirafkan, who is gay...”



Ms Hybrid - addresses issues of women and Westernization.
Shirin Aliabadi

upcoming events



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The Arab uprisings; Sharia and religious laws; the burqa and conspicuous religious symbols; freedom of expression and its limits; apostasy, blasphemy and free thought; "Islamophobia" and racism; honour crimes; faith schools and religious education; reproductive rights and secular values will be amongst the **topics discussed**.

The conference is **endorsed by** Atheist Alliance International; Children First Now; Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain; Equal Rights Now; Fitnah; International Committee against Stoning; International Committee against Execution; International Federation of Iranian Refugees; Iran Solidarity; One Law for All; Secularism is a Women's Issue; The Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science UK; & Women Living Under Muslim Laws, amongst others.

**FOR ORGANISATIONS OR VENDORS WISHING TO BOOKS STALLS,
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E-mail: onelawforall@gmail.com or fitnah.movement@gmail.com

Web: <http://www.onelawforall.org.uk> or <http://www.fitnah.org>

For up to date information on the conference, please visit www.secularconference.com

upcoming events



The Religious Right, Secularism & Civil Rights

WEEKEND ADMISSION

2-day conference, including lunches, a cocktail reception and a Saturday evening dinner and entertainment.

UNWAGED £150

WAGED £160

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PRICE AFTER 1 MAY 2014: UNWAGED £155, WAGED £170, ORGANISATIONS £180.

SINGLE ADMISSION

Admission to **either** Saturday or Saturday conference (including lunch), **or** Saturday dinner & entertainment.

UNWAGED £50

WAGED £60

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REGISTRATION FEES ARE NON-REFUNDABLE AFTER MAY 1, 2014.

For up to date information on the conference, please visit www.secularconference.com

PHOTO CREDIT: Ezequiel Scagnetti © European Union (Front)

editorial

SHARIA LAW IS MADNESS

MARYAM NAMAZIE

Sharia law is highly contested and vehemently opposed in many places across the globe.

In Algeria, women's rights activists [singing for change](#) label 20 years of Sharia in the family code as 20 years of madness. They sing:

"I am telling you a story
Of what the powerful have done
Of rules, a code of despair
A code obsessed with women..."

"This law must be undone...!"

factly endorses discrimination against females, non-Muslims and "illegitimate" children.

Rather than being at the forefront of defending equality before the law, they legitimise inequality and bring back patriarchal and archaic concepts of "justice" that deny rights to women merely because of their gender and children merely for being born out of wedlock! A recent film called "Bastards" shows single mother Rabha El Haimer, an illiterate child bride, in her fight to secure a future for her "illegitimate" child in Morocco.



Photo Credit: Mallorie Nasrollah

In Iran, after the establishment of Sharia law there, the Iranian Lawyers' Association came out in full force against the new religious codes only to be met with arrest and exile; some opponents were even charged with apostasy, which is a "crime" punishable by death...

How tragically ironic, then, that the British Law Society, has decided to side with the Islamists and issue Sharia-complaint guidance which matter-of-

Thanks to the Law Society, this will be the fate of British children and women too!

How very shameful!

"Muslim feminists" tell us that the Law Society has accepted de facto an Islamist interpretation of Sharia law – which is true. It is always those in power who determine the laws and rules, and when it comes to Islam, due to the power and influence of Islamism, it is their brutal version that affects innumerable lives.

“Muslim feminists” also tell us that there are more women-friendly interpretations out there, which the Law Society has ignored. That may well be the case (though I have never seen one that is favourable or fair enough). In my opinion, no religious law can ever give 21st century women and men the full equality they deserve.

In any case, a focus on interpretations misses the point: which is that religion is a private matter open to as many interpretations as there are believers. Once it becomes part of the state or law, it becomes a matter of repressive political power and control with women and girls as its first victims.

The real point is that religion – be it Islam or Judaism or Christianity or what have you – must be kept separate from the state and law if women and everyone else are to be protected and considered equal.

Clearly, there is no place for Sharia in Britain’s legal system just as there is no place for it anywhere.

The fight against the Law Society is part and parcel of the fight against Sharia and religious laws everywhere. And don’t be mistaken. This is not just about opposing institutionalised discrimination. It is about 21st century humanity rejecting a code of law that belongs to the Middle Ages, that sees women as sub-human, that deems sexuality, sex and women’s bodies as illegal whilst legalising child marriages, stonings and misogyny.

Sharia - like all religious laws – is based on a 1400 year old dogmatic and regressive philosophy and its warped understanding of the concepts of equality and justice. Where Islamists have control over the state, Sharia law terrorises the population to submit by showing the damnable nature of dissent. It is a primitive and patriarchal system based on inequality, retribution and religious [im]morality. It is not a rule for equals and has no place in a modern state or system of law.



Only a few days ago, a representative of Khamenei , Iran’s “Supreme Spiritual leader” (absurd titles that only come with religious rule) [said](#): “Sadly, over the past three decades we have seen many working to establish a secular state [in Iran] which will undermine people’s Islamic values and culture”. Of course we have. No one opposes Sharia law more than those who have lived under, fled, or resisted it.

I am sure the Islamists are very grateful to the Law Society for upholding their values at the expense of the many others who demand equality and secularism.

Law Society listen up: you must immediately withdraw your shameful guidance. Withdraw it now!

In the words of Algerian women singing for change:

“We aren’t asking for favours.

“History speaks for us.”

“Sharia - like all religious laws – is based on a 1400 year old dogmatic and regressive philosophy and its warped understanding of the concepts of equality and justice. Where Islamists have control over the state, Sharia law terrorises the population to submit by showing the damnable nature of dissent. It is a primitive and patriarchal system based on inequality, retribution and religious [im]morality. It is not a rule for equals and has no place in a modern state or system of law.”

our campaigns

IRAN: SAVE RAYHANEH JABBARI FROM EXECUTION BY HANGING

Reyhaneh Jabbari is now 26 years old and has been in Tehran's dreaded Evin prison since 2007.

In July 2007 she was alone inside a coffee shop and was speaking on her phone about architecture and design. Morteza, a physician and a former employee of the feared Iranian Intelligence Services, overheard the conversation, approached her and asked for her expertise in order to renovate his office. The afternoon of 7th of July 2007, Morteza made an appointment with Reyhaneh for business purposes.

Reportedly, Morteza stopped his car at a pharmacy on the way to the appointment. It was later discovered he bought condoms. Then they went into the apartment and Morteza closed the door. Morteza approached her and demanded to have sex with her; he had already made some drinks for her. Forensics analysis found that the drink he intended to serve to Rayhaneh contained sleeping aids and sedatives. Reyhaneh did not allow him to rape her, therefore he asked her several times to have sex with him but Reyhaneh resisted. During this time she felt threatened and scared.

Fearing imminent rape, she took a knife out of her bag and stabbed Morteza at the back of his right shoulder. Morteza died due to heavy bleeding.

An interrogator went to the apartment and made a report. At that time Reyhaneh clearly stated to the investigator that she was innocent, that she had met Morteza a week earlier, and that said she killed him only in self defence.

"The evening I was there, I knew that he wanted to rape me, so because of self defence I stabbed him and escaped," she said.

Reyhaneh explained that she had to defend herself: "Two and half months before the crime, I saw the doctor and his friend, at that time my phone was ringing, so I picked up the phone and was speaking to one of my friends about the decoration, and design, and the doctor's friend realized that I was an interior designer."

She added: "Morteza's friends came closer and got my contact number to ask help to design a private health centre. After a couple of days, the doctor's friend's calls started and thereafter Morteza himself called and invited me to visit the flat, which was supposed to be converted to private health centre. The time was 6:15 that evening when I reached there, and I found



Morteza looking suspicious. I was so worried and anxious so, I decided to take out the knife and I stabbed his right shoulder. Believe me, I just wanted to be safe, that is why I did it, because I had no other choice. The same day, Reyhaneh was sentenced, and the decision was confirmed by the Supreme Court.

Now, any moment it is possible for her to be hanged. *Fitnah* calls on groups and individuals to step forward and stop her execution.

In Iran men and women, including some minors, face execution everyday for some 131 offenses punishable by death under the Islamic Republic of Iran. Some of these crimes include adultery, theft, homosexuality, drug possession and political dissidence. Iran hangs more people per capita than any other country in the world, Since President Rouhani's election; there has been a sharp increase in executions. Trials in Iran fall short of International standards and the majority of those hanged did not even have access to a lawyer, jury, or even evidence.

[To sign the petition supporting Rayhaneh, click here.](#)



عکس کودکی ریحاته یا خواهران کوچگترش

our campaigns

THE LAW SOCIETY MUST WITHDRAW ITS GUIDANCE ON SHARIA-SUCCESSION RULES

We, the undersigned, are appalled to learn that the Law Society, the representative body for solicitors in England and Wales, has issued Sharia-related guidance on wills, succession and inheritance.



The guidance says:

“Certain principles of Sharia are different to English succession laws. For example, it is not possible to inherit under Sharia rules via a deceased relative. No distinction is made between children of different marriages, but illegitimate and adopted children are not Sharia heirs.

“The male heirs in most cases receive double the amount inherited by a female heir of the same class. Non-Muslims may not inherit at all, and only Muslim marriages are recognised. Similarly, a divorced spouse is no longer a Sharia heir, as the entitlement depends on a valid Muslim marriage existing at the date of death”.

Whilst not binding, the guidance legitimises rules which are highly contested by many Muslims themselves and which discriminates against Muslim women, non-Muslims, and 'illegitimate' and adopted children. The guidance seriously undermines the Equality Act, citizenship rights and one law for all.

Since individuals are already free to dispense of their estate as they see fit (as long as they provide for their dependants) such guidance unwittingly aids and abets Islamist attempts at subverting democratic laws and principles with a de facto parallel legal system where minority women and children have increasingly fewer rights than other citizens.

This scandalous guidance is similar to that which Universities UK published endorsing gender segregation at universities in Britain. UUK was promptly forced to withdraw its guidance after widespread condemnation.

We call on the Law Society to immediately and unequivocally withdraw its guidance.

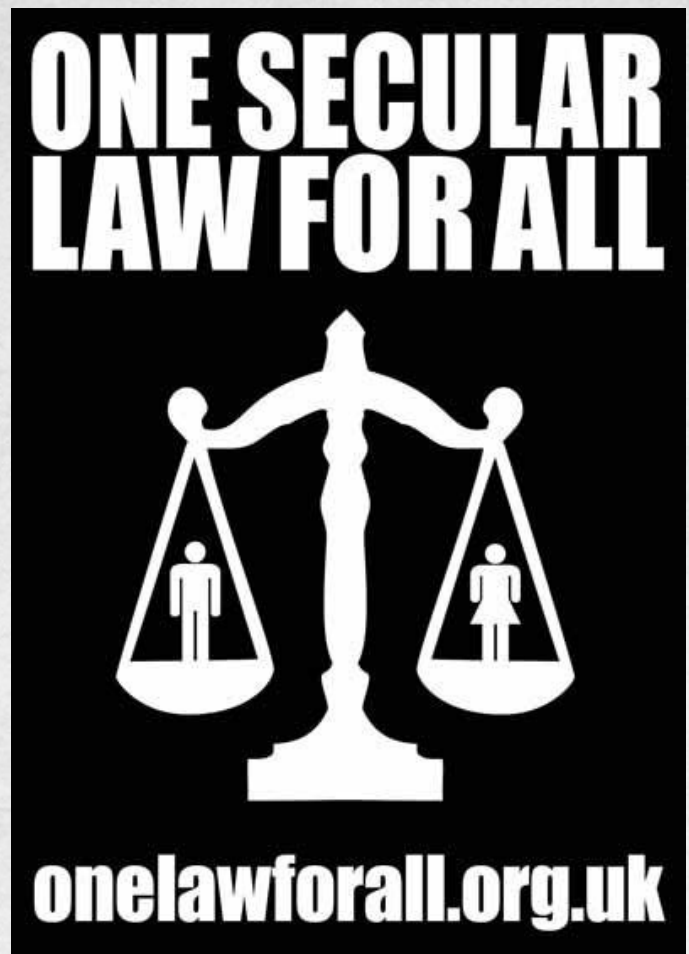
[To see a list of signatories, click here.](#)

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Send questions and comments to fitnah.movement@gmail.com and we will respond in the next issue of the publication.

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join us

Fitnah – Movement for Women’s Liberation is a protest movement demanding freedom, equality, and secularism and calling for an end to misogynist cultural, religious and moral laws and customs, compulsory veiling, sex apartheid, sex trafficking, and violence against women. We remind the Islamic regime of Iran and Islamists everywhere that the women’s liberation movement is a source of fitnah for their rule alone. We are Islamism’s worst fitnah!

To join Fitnah – Movement for Women’s Liberation, [visit here.](#)

[Click ‘like’ on our Facebook page.](#)

Supporters include: *Amina Tyler, Tunisian topless activist; Avijit Roy, Activist, Bangladesh; Chadi Bejjani, Lebanese Atheists, Lebanon; Dya Ahmad, Member of Youth Parliament in Iraq and Secretary of Student and Youth organisation in Iraq; Harold Walter Kroto, Nobel Prize in Chemistry Winner, UK; Imad Iddine Habib, Founder, Moroccan Council of Ex-Muslims, Morocco; Inna Shevchenko, Spokesperson, FEMEN, France; Karl Karnadi, Founder, Indonesian Atheists, Indonesia; Lloyd Newson, Director of DV8 Physical Theatre, UK; Maryam Jamel, Organisation of Women’s Liberation of Iraq; Nadia El-Fani, Tunisian Filmmaker; most recent films “Neither Allah nor Master” and “Our Breasts; Our Arms”, France; Raheel Raza, President, Council for Muslims Facing Tomorrow, Canada; Safia Lebdi, Founder, “Les insoumis-es”, France; Shahin Najafi, Independent Anarchist Artist, Germany; Soad Baba Aissa, President, of Association pour l’Egalité, la Mixité et la Laïcité en Algérie, France; Soraya L. Chemaly, Writer and Activist, USA; Tarek Fatah, Writer, Canada; Taslima Nasrin, Bangladeshi Writer, India; Waleed Al-Husseini, Palestinian Blogger and Founder of Council of Ex-Muslims of France, France; and Zari Asli, Women’s Rights Campaigner, Canada.*



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