

Here is why Sharia Law has no place in Britain or elsewhere

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By Nahla Mahmoud

There are many reasons why this needs to be said, starting with a personal trigger. I was recently interviewed by Channel 4's [4thought.tv programme](#) which was broadcast two weeks ago about my opinions on 'What does Sharia Law have to offer Britain'. I realised that I was the only one out of seven people interviewed that was clearly against Sharia and for a secular state. Activist and gay Muslim [Omar Kuddus](#) who was also interviewed regarding the same topic, agreed that 'Sharia' discriminates against homosexuals and would threaten his safety and civil rights.

My interview has triggered a debate in the Sudanese media, both at home and in the diaspora, from which campaigns have emerged inciting people against me calling me a 'Kafira' (infidel) and 'Murtadda' (left Islam) . I guess Sudanese government officials have time to watch Channel 4 because the [Sudanese Armed Forces' Facebook page](#) posted my picture declaring me an infidel and apostate. Who knew that my private beliefs could denigrate a country's government, religion, and armed forces?!

Focusing on Islam and Sharia as such here is mainly because of my experience living under an Islamic regime. However, I strongly oppose Sharia law as well as any other religious based laws because I deeply believe in secular, humanist values which put each human being on an equal basis with every other individual. International human rights are a testament to that principle and stand directly opposed to the discriminatory practices enshrined in and justified by Sharia law.

It is important that we secularists demand not only a secular Britain, but also a secular Middle East, North Africa, and world. Sharia as such is a law of a religion with state power in many regions around the world. We have also witnessed in the last two years a grand hijacking by Islamists of the achievements of civil society in the Middle East. Not only that, but here in Britain there are now 85 Sharia councils implementing Sharia law on the streets of London, Birmingham, Bradford and elsewhere.

It is important for me to clarify what I mean by Sharia. To be precise, I am discussing the laws and legislation which are already in practice in the UK and abroad, not theoretical or utopian ideas that only exist in the minds of those who defend and are usually in favour of Sharia. The examples below include Islamic laws in countries around the world that claim to be implementing Sharia — the right Sharia — and are legislated based on the main sources in Islam, the Quran and Hadith, and sometimes in Fatwas. What is clear from an anthropological perspective is that these interpretations are performed by those in power and as a result the application and punishments associated with Sharia vary dramatically around the world.

One: Women

Sharia discriminates against women (and Muslim women specifically): compared to feminist victories elsewhere, women are still not considered equal in most Islamic settings. A woman's testimony is worthy half a man's in Islam. She gets half the inheritance of her male siblings; a

woman's marriage contract is between her male guardian and her husband. A man can have four wives and divorce his wife by simple repudiation using the word "Talig", whereas a woman must give specific reasons, some of which are extremely difficult to prove. Child custody reverts to the father at a pre-set age, even if the father is abusive. Women who remarry lose custody of their children.

These are real issues of inequality and discrimination that Muslim women face every day. I have personally experienced some because according to the Sharia constitution in Sudan, I am only eligible for half of my brothers' share of our inheritance and I need at least two women to one man to testify in court cases. Other brutal examples end in punishment by stoning crimes such as [Iranian Sakineh Ashtiani](#) who was accused of having a relationship outside of an 'Islamic contract marriage', or the public flogging of [Sudanese Lubna Hussein](#) for her un-Islamic dress.

Another issue is marital rape, honour killings and domestic violence: in Pakistan, there are [300 cases of acid burnt women](#) with no charges pressed against their husbands. Here in the UK, a study reported by the [One Law for All campaign](#) shows that 4 out of 10 women in Sharia court cases were party to civil injunctions against their husbands. The One Law for All campaign as well as other groups like [Secularism Is a Women's Issue](#) are among the frontline defenders campaigning against Sharia courts, fighting for women's rights and demanding gender equality.

Two: Children

Sharia discriminates against children. Not only does it affect children when they are young, but the implications will last their entire life. Top of the list is child marriage. Under Sharia law, a girl is eligible for marriage as soon as a girl begins her first period. This makes it difficult to maintain a minimum age for girls to be married. Considering there were at least [five cases recorded in the London Borough of Islington](#) (including girls of only 9 years old), I wouldn't bother to count the number of child marriages in Islamic states where it is *legal*.

Other discrimination against children that must be considered is the lack of exposure to different ideas and thoughts. Children from an Islamic background are often taught to close their minds to new ideas and some are brought up to hate their Jewish, Christian and Hindu classmates, as well as any gay students in their class.

In addition to my own experiences at school in Sudan, one can grab any school curriculum from an Islamic state see how it restricts critical thinking and any questioning of religious doctrine. Evolutionary theory is banned from most educational systems in Islamic states, as it contradicts the creationist story in the Quran. Sudanese professor, [Faroque Ahmed Ibrahim, stated in his open letter](#) that teaching evolution at University of Khartoum was among the main reasons he was tortured and imprisoned by the Sudanese government. Moreover, little girls are often taught from birth that they are 'lesser' human beings, which results in lower self-esteem and lack of confidence later in life. It is however, the case with most other faith-based schools and education including Christianity and Judaism which, sadly, have the same 'holy-centralised' ideology.

Three: Homosexuals

Sharia discriminates against homosexuals. On this particular issue, Islam, as well as Christianity and Judaism, hold the same intolerant view. Homosexuality is forbidden in most Islamic states with punishments ranging from a fine or public flogging to life imprisonment. Ten Islamic states impose a death penalty for homosexuals, including Iran, Mauritania, Nigeria, Pakistan, Saudi-Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Iraq, Yemen and some states in Malaysia. In 2011, governmental driven gangs have been [killing gays across Iraq](#).

Four: Non-Muslims

Sharia discriminates against non-Muslims, including other sects within Islam such as Bahia's, Ahmadia's, and Shia if under Sunni ruling government or the reverse. Under Sharia law, no one is allowed to force someone to convert to Islam, however, someone who is born into an Islamic family will grow up with extreme social pressure from their family. If this person wishes to convert to another religion or be an atheist, they are often considered an apostate, which can be punishable by death. Non-Muslims are subjected to extra taxes ('Jezya') and are afforded fewer rights in civic and family matters. For example, non-Muslim men (except Jewish and Christians) cannot marry Muslim women, while children of non-Muslim women cannot adopt their religion. Serious violence has occurred targeted at non-Muslim minorities in Islamic countries, such as the [bombing of Coptic in Egypt](#) or the [attack of eight churches in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, in 2011](#). Although some of these groups operate as separate fundamental extremists who don't necessarily represent mainstream Islam or the ruling Islamic governments, these same groups operate in their territory and are protected by the local governments.

Five: Non-Believers and Atheists

Sharia discriminates against non-believers, atheists and apostates. It truly disgusts me that apostasy and blasphemy laws are still in practice in some regions of the world. Did you know that free thinking and freedom of speech are a crime punishable by death, public flogging and imprisonment in the 21st century? I have seared in my memory the brutal persecutions and executions of many atheists and scientists for the simple crime of critical thinking.

Cases such as [Iranian Ali Ghorabat for apostasy](#), [Jafar Kazemi and Mohammad Ali Haji Aghaee for enmity against God](#), [Sudanese theologian Mahmoud M. Taha](#) for his progressive Islamic views and Egyptian [Nasr H. Abu Zaid](#) for his critical views on the Qur'an show the widespread persecution of people who dare to question blind belief.

This is not a thing of the past: just this month [Kuwait jailed Abdel Aziz Mohamed Albaz](#) for criticizing Islam, [Saudi Arabia jailed Raif Badawi](#) for his liberal views, [Tunisian artist Nadia Jelassi is facing prison](#) for her 'un-Islamic' artistic pieces. Countries like Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Yemen implement the death penalty for those who renounce or criticize Islam, but they also punish anyone who is progressive, liberal or wishes to think freely and live a modern, 21st century life.

Being an atheist and an ex-Muslim should have been a private matter for me under a secular state. However, under an 'Islamic Inquisition' as fellow secular campaigner [Maryam Namazi](#) describes, it became necessary for dissenters, especially those who are persecuted, to publicly air our views and call for equal treatment because this persecution will not end until we stand together and speak out. I chose to speak out on Channel 4 and in many other venues in the UK because I cannot stand by and watch others suffer the same discrimination and persecution that I faced. The current persecution of the five groups I discussed above, both here in the UK and around the world, provide a duty for everyone to stand up for the simple principle: all humans are equal.

For me, my atheism holds this broader meaning because I am taking a political stand to oppose mythology and advocate for evidence-based science and critical thinking. My stand is a way of supporting freedom of expression, freedom of religion or no-religion. I stand, indeed, for human rights in order to support equal rights for all citizens despite our gender, age, sexuality, religion or ethnicity.

I believe this is everyone's battle, including progressive, secular and liberal Muslims. The right to live, think and express freely your opinions is one of the great achievements of human civilization.

These values belong to all of us regardless of our background or geographical regions. We cannot limit these achievements to 'western values' or 'cultural sensitivity'.

We must each strongly and unequivocally demand one equal law for everyone – both in the UK and abroad. Let's make sure the next generation of freethinkers does not have to suffer condemnation online or offline, face jailing, public flogging or death.

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See also: [Court opens way to divorces by Sharia? Hold on a minute...](#) by James Wilson

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