

Sharia Law and Middle Class Feminism

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On Saturday, I was honoured to attend the launch of the International Sindhi Women's Organisation. Here was a group of brave, principled, and intelligent British Pakistani women who had come together to talk about their future, their fears, and most importantly, their rights.

They discussed forced marriage (and what to do about it), "honour" killings, and sharia law among other important issues that affect them. However, quite what the middle-class, predominantly white, 20-somethings I met on Sunday would have to say to these women is anyone's guess – but it might contain a strong hint of "shut up and accept your culture".

On Sunday, I spoke at the University of Kent's Critical Law Society conference under the heading of 'Equality: Are We There Yet?'

I was invited to speak alongside pro-sharia advocate Aina Khan (more on her later) and a PhD student (more on her later as well) and found myself in a not-too-unfamiliar situation of having to argue against domestic violence in opposition to a room full of "feminists".

Having described how sharia family law in Britain allows men to beat their wives - as the testimony of women who have been through it confirms – the "feminists" weren't quite sure whether or not they disapproved. I was met with highly accusatory questions such as How can we be multicultural if we don't allow sharia?, and comments such as We must tolerate ... well, pretty much everything from what I could make out. With the mumblings and applause in favour of my opponents, I was left in no doubt as to the company I was keeping.

Here's how it seems to go: "We are feminists. We are incredibly right-on. We read the *Guardian*. We disapprove of women's breasts getting a public airing and we strongly object to the fact that boards of directors are not 50% female. We will go absolutely ballistic if anyone dare understate how vile domestic violence is, or attempt in any way to justify it. We are feminists you see. Oh, but only when it comes to white women – did we mention that?"

At this point you may, as I do, envisage them leaning forward a bit, hands back-to-back between knees and continuing - "You're different you see. You come from funny countries where people are a bit strange and where women don't seem to mind a punch in the mouth quite as much we would. You can't possibly expect us to stand up with you against violence. Violence is your culture. Now, stop being such a racist and accept it".

I'll now come back to the PhD student sitting next to me and falling over her good self to sell the beauty of sharia to us all. Following the meeting, I turned to her and said "I bet you think you're a feminist right?" She answered a very emphatic Yes. So I asked her if she condemns sharia. "Nope".

Well then you're not a feminist.

Now let me explain. A feminist stands up for women because they are women, not because they are white, middle class, English speaking, Christian, atheist, Jew or Muslim – but because they are women. A feminist opposes all violence against women because they are women. Feminists

oppose the rape of women, because they are women. Feminists oppose these all the time and for all women.

This is not however what I heard from some of these students on Sunday. Their message is very clear – domestic violence is acceptable under certain circumstances. As I said at the time, if we were talking about any other situation, I have no doubt that we would have been united in our disgust at wife-beaters... but throw the word "sharia" in there and suddenly the wife-beater becomes the victim; an innocent bystander whose own oppression leads him to lash out. It's not his fault, (haven't we had this argument already?) it's the fault of the west/Israel/America.

Let's get this straight once and for all – a man who beats his wife is a criminal, and for the protection of the rights of all women, he must be punished and his actions condemned. Full stop. If you think this should apply only to white women and care nothing for the plight of your non-white sister, then you are a racist. Full stop.

I must talk a little more about Aina Khan – Britain's favourite sharia-loving lawyer who is making quite a name for herself in such circles. I've heard Aina speak many times but this weekend her comments were even stranger than usual. This time, upon realising she was defending the indefensible, Khan stated that she doesn't send her clients to the Islamic Sharia Council or the Muslim Arbitration Tribunal; the two largest sharia court bodies in the country. What they're doing isn't proper sharia, she said. It's strange how this only came to light after I had read out the quotes condoning domestic violence and marital rape from 'judges' of both the Islamic Sharia Council and the Muslim Arbitration Tribunal (people Khan has previously boasted about how wonderfully respectfully they treat her, but this time denied having any contact with them).

I asked Khan on Sunday and I ask her again now, where do you send your large number of sharia clients if not to the Islamic Sharia Council or Muslim Arbitration Tribunal? Where are the sharia courts in Britain that don't treat a woman's testimony as being worth half of her husband's, or where she's not told to go home if she has her period ("Come back when you're clean"), or where her children are not taken from her at a pre-set age, or where she has the right to divorce on her own terms and doesn't have to put up with violence? Where are these wonderful courts, Aina? Because if you could just reveal them, we could sort this out once and for all. We could make sure that devout Muslim women only went to these non-misogynist courts for their Islamic resolutions and we could make sure to put Al-Haddad (sorry "Haitham" as you called him), Sheikha Abu Sayeed, and Suhaib "stoning will turn Britain in to a haven of peace" Hasan out of business once and for all.

We can save the reputation of sharia law, reveal the truth of its wonderful woman-friendly version, and we would all be so much better off because of it. Come on Aina, tell us where they are.

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Anne Marie Waters was a member of the NSS. The views expressed in our blogs are those of the author and may not necessarily represent the views of the NSS.

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